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Revisiting Imperial China's Trajectory in the Context of the 'Rise of  
the West'. The Eurocentric Legacy in Historical Sociology.

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THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN  
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DPHIL IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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### SUMMARY

This thesis proposes a theoretical and historical reconstruction of the 'Great Divergence' between Europe and China. In contrast with both the dominant narrative on the 'Rise of the West' and its main detractor, the California School, the dissertation enquires critically into the categories of 'China' and 'Europe' and contests their temporal and spatial homogeneity. In this, the thesis proposes a unique way to overcome Eurocentrism in International Relations and to sociologically understand similarity and dissimilarity in development.

The thesis reveals facets of Eurocentrism which are overlooked in all approaches engaging with the issue of divergence and informing the IR literature (neo-institutionalist economic history, neo-Weberian Sociology, World-Systems Theory, mode-of-production analyses, and the California School). These Eurocentric conceptual anachronisms are: the naturalisation of the European international system; the understanding of Europe as a homogenous entity; the postulate of a universal rationality; and the ontologising of analytical categories derived from the Western experience. The thesis' methodology, informed by Political Marxism, overcomes such Eurocentrism through its unique reading of Marx, leading to a socialising of geopolitics and rationality, and theorising the specific nature of developmental trajectories, thereby enabling the productive transfer of its method to non-European contexts.

From this anti-Eurocentric standpoint, the thesis submits an alternative narrative on the trajectory of Imperial China from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Re-problematising the contested and changing nature of China's authority relations and political geography as stemming from social conflicts around politically-constituted power challenges the Realist, English School's, and California School's assumptions of its stability, hegemony, and immutability widely held to have prevented take-off. Such a convergence between Continental Europe and China until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, contrasting with the IR assumptions of a series of Chinese absences and European structural exceptionalisms, highlights the Anglo-Continental 17<sup>th</sup> Century divergence as a unique resolution of social conflicts, essential to Europe-China comparative strategies.

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**List of abbreviations**

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| AMP        | Asiatic Mode of production                          |
| HM         | Historical Materialism                              |
| HS         | Historical Sociology                                |
| IEMP model | Ideological, Economic, Military and Political model |
| IR         | International Relations                             |
| PM         | Political Marxism                                   |
| RCM        | Rational Choice Marxism                             |
| UCD        | Uneven and Combined Development                     |
| WST        | World-Systems Theory                                |

### Table of Chinese dynasties

|                                       |                    |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| ‘Six Dynasties’                       | 265/280 - 589      |
| Jin Dynasty                           | 265/280 - 311/420  |
| Southern and Northern Dynasties       | 311/420 - 589      |
| <br>Sui Dynasty                       | <br>581 - 618      |
| <br>Tang Dynasty                      | <br>618 – 907      |
| Early Tang (pre-An Lushan Rebellion)  | 618 - 755          |
| Late Tang (post-An Lushan Rebellion)  | 763 – 884/907      |
| <br>‘Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms’ | <br>907 – 960/979  |
| <br>Song Dynasty                      | <br>960/979 - 1279 |
| Southern Song                         | 960/979 - 1127     |
| Northern Song                         | 1127 - 1279        |
| <br>Yuan Dynasty                      | <br>1279-1368      |
| <br>Ming Dynasty                      | <br>1368-1644      |
| <br>Qing Dynasty                      | <br>1644-1911      |

## Introduction

The ascent of China as a great power has attracted considerable attention within the discipline of International Relations (IR) in recent decades on account of its non-conformity to Realist expectations of instability coinciding with the rise of great powers. Debates around Asia's potential exceptionalism in this regard began in the nineties: 'Will Europe's past be Asia's future?' (Friedberg, 2000), or is 'Asia's past [...] Asia's future' (Huntingdon, 1996)? In mainstream IR, the issue of the rise of China has been connected to the renewal of examinations of similarity or dissimilarity between 'Eastern' and Western trajectories. Confronted with the puzzle of China's non-conformity to expectations of Western or traditional IR theory, the latter has been argued to be unable to account for the geopolitical diversity of international systems (Acharya and Buzan, 2010; Wohlforth, 2007). China's recent 'peaceful rise' might be as unique as was its trajectory and its regional order in a historical perspective (Buzan, 2010; Kang, 2007). Indeed, we are witnessing a return to historical enquiry into China's allegedly distinctive identity in order to comprehend its exceptional pattern of rises and falls, from its imperial history to its recent rise.

Enquiries into similarity and dissimilarity between China and Europe have parallel roots in a core debate of Historical Sociology (HS). The revisiting of debates over the timing, nature, and distinctiveness of the emergence of modernity in Europe, through its comparison with China's history, was rekindled in IR by Kenneth Pomeranz's *Great Divergence*. The prevalent 'Rise of the West' paradigm maintains that the European trajectory was unique, as did the classics of comparative sociology, chiefly Karl Marx and Max Weber. The California School's investigations have been organised against such narratives which traditionally emphasised what China lacked and so prevented a European-like take-off. This debate on China's development was interwoven with the issue of Eurocentrism in IR and HS, as this gave rise to the following questions. How does IR's traditional focus on the European experience affect our wider understanding of world history? How are categories constructed, agency revealed, and history understood when we enquire into non-Western developmental paths? Does it lead us to understand China's historical trajectory as based on singular forms of internal and regional ordering antithetical

to Europe's, as argued by the English School? Or is the replacement of the discourse on European exceptionalism better done through retracing centuries of Eurasian similarity, as claimed by the California School? Such questions might also underline the need to seriously engage with Sinology's 'China-centered' model and its attempt 'to reconstruct the Chinese past as the Chinese themselves experienced it rather than in terms of an imported sense of historical problem' (Cohen 2003: 186).

To answer these related concerns on divergence and Eurocentrism, this thesis proposes to enquire into the very basis of the questions asked. The assumptions behind the traditional question 'What respectively explains rise and non-rise in Europe and China?' contains in itself all the notions which must be radically historicised, socialised, and politicised to resolve some of the more surreptitious aspects of Eurocentrism. I suggest that mobilising literature from outside IR is necessary to elucidate the question of historical divergence, understood in terms of geopolitical orders and state-formations, in order to go beyond an understanding of the non-Western world simply in terms of its deviation from a (European) naturalised path. This thesis therefore provides a historical account of the social and geopolitical dynamics of the Chinese Empire between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries and compares these dynamics with those of early modern Europe. Its crucial mode of interrogation, informed by the theoretical framework of Political Marxism (PM), however differs from the California School's. This task is indeed undertaken in the context of the wider, anti-Eurocentric, objective of evaluating the historical grounding of analytical categories. The thesis' crucial findings therefore go beyond the California School's postponing of the timing of the emergence of modernity after an era of Eurasian similarity. Instead, I claim that such a comparison must start by interrogating the socio-political categories of Europe and China over time and space, which are still held as self-evident in the California School's analyses. Overall, it is argued that continental Europe had much more in common with Imperial China until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, than with England from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century onwards. Still, I maintain that China's trajectory is best understood through its *sui generis* political and geopolitical orders varying over time, rather than through a dichotomous or analogous comparison with Europe, whose constituent units must moreover be submitted to a similar analysis.

In this introduction, I will first engage with the four meanings given to Eurocentrism in the discipline of IR. Secondly, I will assess the impact of the ‘Great Divergence’ debate on IR and HS enquiries for understanding social change and the construction of categories. This will lead me to introduce PM’s ‘English-centered’ stance on the ‘Rise of the West’, which I argue is imperative to enable in turn a ‘China-centered’, anti-Eurocentric history of Imperial China’s development. I will conclude by presenting the outline of my thesis’ argument.

### **1. The issue of Eurocentrism in International Relations**

Given the wide-spread interest having recently arisen in IR in the debates around Eurocentrism<sup>1</sup>, it would be beyond the scope of this introduction to cover all contributions to this broad problematique. I will primarily focus on this issue as formulated within HS (conceived in a broad sense) or engaging on its grounds, as this is the field in which my contribution is to be located<sup>2</sup>. The working definition of Eurocentrism to be used throughout the thesis is as follows: Eurocentrism means the understanding of world history through the prism of European modernity. This definition is sufficiently open to incorporate the main anti-Eurocentric critiques, as well as my own later refinement of some of its overlooked facets. In the literature, there are four main meanings given to Eurocentrism, which are however often seen as inter-related<sup>3</sup>: (1) the normative postulate of European superiority; (2) the stadial conception of history; (3) the Western-informed categorisation of the world; and (4) the non-consideration of non-Western contributions to the ‘Rise of the West’.

The first meaning of Eurocentrism is closely related to Edward Saïd’s (1978: 2) definition of Orientalism, as the institutions and practices that discipline ‘the Orient’ by defining it as the reverse image of ‘the West’. Orientalism implies an ‘ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and [...] “the Occident”’. In its milder versions,

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<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004; Jones, 2006; Hobson, 2012;

<sup>2</sup> This therefore excludes most notably some Postcolonial critiques of Eurocentrism.

<sup>3</sup> This categorisation is partly inspired by Wallerstein (1997) and Matin (2011).

such Eurocentrism is understood as attributing exceptional and inherent properties to Europe. This in turn explains the incommensurability of these developmental paths and the ‘superior’ forms this led to in the West. Eurocentrism’s second meaning, the stadial conception of development, refers to a universal theory of history, modelled on the European trajectory, which all are deemed to have to follow. This assumes the linearity of development, in which non-Western societies are relegated to the ‘imaginary waiting-room of history’ (Chakrabarty, 2000: 8). Some ‘historicist’ readings of Marx, as a theory of predefined modes of production succeeding one another in a teleological fashion, are the best example of this meaning. The third definition of Eurocentrism points to writers’ inability to understand non-Western forms of development, whether due to the Western anchoring of their theories and categories or to their neglect of alternative forms of development. The agency, dynamism, and historicity of the non-West are thus seen as systematically downplayed, either by one-sided comparisons or by the absence of analysis of the non-West (Frank, 1998; Hobson, 2004; Pomeranz, 2000; Wong, 1997). Best labelled as ‘Eurocentredness’, this ignores parallel (‘proto-modern’) or comparable (given a broader definition of variables) developments outside Europe, most of the time seen as being later hindered by European imperialism. The fourth meaning of Eurocentrism criticises more precisely the endogenous explanations of the emergence of Western modernity and the methodological nationalism this entails. A perspective looking exclusively through the ‘European tunnel of time’ (Blaut, 2000) blurs the causal role of interconnections. Analyses of interconnections would highlight non-Western contributions to modernity, and the ‘mutually constitutive’ character of social development (Matin, 2013: 355; Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2013). This fourth type of Eurocentrism overlooks crucial factors needed to explain the ‘Rise of the West’ which originated outside Europe, mainly riches gained from colonisation and ideas and institutions imported through earlier instances of globalisation. The non-Western world is thus posited as exterior to, instead of constitutive of, key processes in Western development (Bhambra, 2011).

How these problems have particularly affected the Marxist tradition from which my theorisation is derived, as well as which further Eurocentric problems are overlooked in IR, will be developed later in the thesis. For now, I want to sketch out how my argument deals

with these four types of Eurocentrism, before turning, in the next section, to my original contribution to the debate on Eurocentrism. Each of these four Eurocentric issues has to be engaged with seriously. Overall, I claim that these theoretical issues have to be resolved on empirical grounds, through historical investigation. They will therefore resurface periodically throughout the thesis, in order to give them the full treatment they deserve. My findings lead me to affirm, against the first meaning of Eurocentrism, that European homogeneity must not be assumed and that, therefore, there could not have been inherent properties leading the West into modernity. Secondly, my historical enquiries on Imperial China's trajectory and early modern Europe's social diversity, focusing on their specificities and the open-ended nature of the social changes they witnessed, challenge any universal theory of successive stages. Thirdly, because of this method, my investigation into similarities between continental Europe and China follows the reciprocal comparison's prescriptions<sup>4</sup>. Finally, the analysis of the emergence of capitalism in England I use remained vulnerable to the critique of its 'internalist' perspective. Potential non-Western contributions to this transition are, however, to be ruled out on empirical, rather than normative or theoretical, grounds<sup>5</sup>. This is not an endeavour pursued in the thesis, rather revolving around the potential anti-Eurocentric transfer of PM categories and method to a key case of comparison between the 'East' and the 'West'. After all, 'Eastern agency' does not matter only in assessing its importance in the 'Rise of the West'. How all this can be formulated positively in order to contribute both to anti-Eurocentric theory and comparative study, and how this relates to the PM method, is demonstrated in the following section.

## **2. The significance of the 'Great Divergence' debate within theories of transition**

The 'Great Divergence' problematique has its roots in a crucial debate in HS and IR, that is, the advent of the modern world and the geopolitical dynamics it gave rise to. The new formulation of this perennial puzzle by the California School likewise engages with the topic of the origins of such social change in Europe, but tests more consistently one of its reverse claims, that is, the alleged non-development of Imperial China. Traditional

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<sup>4</sup> Reciprocal comparison implies 'viewing both sides of the comparison as 'deviations' when seen through the expectations of the other, rather than leaving one as always the norm' (Pomeranz, 2000: 8).

<sup>5</sup> Key PM contributions to such assessment of extra-European factors in the transition include Brenner (1976) and Wood (2001).

enquiries since Marx and Weber have indeed been motivated by the question ‘Why Europe?’ The California School has reformulated this by asking ‘Why not China?’, and more crucially ‘why Europe is not China, not only why China is not Europe’ (Pomeranz, 2000: 2). The ‘Great Divergence’ debate has therefore brought many interesting lines of historical enquiry into prominence within IR, if only by displacing the primary referent in terms of comparison (Wong, 1997).

The debate around whether China historically followed a path similar to Europe has also entailed the evaluation of the adequacy, when applied to the history of China, of many of the traditional models used to explain European patterns of social, economic, and geopolitical change. The commercial model, the demographic model, price theory, the geopolitical competition model, the balance of power theory, and the model of international society have all been tested for their potential importation to the East, with uneven success (Pomeranz, 2000; Frank, 1998; Lee and Wang, 1997; Rosenthal and Wong, 2011; Hui, 2005; Kang, 2010b; Wohlforth, 2007; Zhang and Buzan, 2012). IR theorists trying to resolve the enigma of Chinese development have however also been confronted by ‘indigenous’ models. The most noteworthy explanatory models used in traditional Sinology include the ‘state/gentry’ mode of analyses (Chang, 1962; Ho, 1962) and the ‘dynastic cycles’ paradigm inspired by Chinese official historiography (Yang, 1954). The ‘Great Divergence’ debate has therefore led IR enquiries on China to confront a wide variety of literature, thus bringing HS back into important discussions within the discipline. At a broad level, a central issue of the ‘Great Divergence’ debate - and of this thesis - is how to account for similarity or dissimilarity in different places over time, in light of recent developments in the field of China’s history. This necessarily invokes the issue of the origins of social change, but also of spatial categories of analysis. It is worth revealing what respectively distinguishes the California School and PM in these debates within economic history, political development, and IR, especially regarding the impact of these issues for anti-Eurocentric enquiries.

Narratives of the ‘Rise of the West’ have traditionally enquired into, unsurprisingly, the spatial entity of the West. Since it is the singularity of its breakthrough into modernity for



which an explanation is sought, enquiries have naturally been made into its distinctive characteristics. A series of different factors have been proposed as having dissolved traditional societal organisations in Europe, in a process which has given rise to state forms and economies as we know them today. Models have been developed across disciplines and amongst contending theoretical approaches in order to explain how demographic growth (Postan, 1966), urbanisation (Pirenne, 1969), potential multipolarity (Kennedy, 1987), and/or intensification of exchange (Braudel, 1979; Lopez, 1976) set medieval Europe, as a whole, on a distinct path.

One narrative particularly stands out by contesting this widespread understanding of modern development as arising from a process common to multiple European countries. In what has been called the ‘Brenner Debate’ (Ashton and Philpin, 1987), the economic historian Robert Brenner (1976) engaged with the empirical paradox that different Western countries did not demonstrate to the same extent the outcomes predicted by the demographic or commercial models, most significantly modern growth. In order to overcome this conundrum, he proposed to look comparatively into demographic and labour productivity trends. Brenner demonstrated that Adam Smith’s own criteria for assessing modern development (systematic specialisation and innovation aimed at profit-maximisation) were present only in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century English countryside<sup>6</sup>, and this was further confirmed through the debate on English agrarian relations (Allen, 1992; Wrigley, 1983). This implies that different societies can have been faced with similar patterns, such as the ‘commercial revolution’ and the 14<sup>th</sup> Century demographic devastation, and yet they produced diverging long-term results in their transitions out of feudalism, such as capitalism (England), Absolutism (France), nobility militarisation (Prussia), or ‘second serfdom’ (Eastern Europe).

Such an understanding of the diverging European trajectories calls for the introduction of agency within theories of social development. This is the case as modern development can

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<sup>6</sup> Later on, Brenner (2001) has argued that capitalist development had also occurred in certain Dutch provinces during the same period. Wood (2002b) and Post (2002) disagree with Brenner on this debate within PM.

no longer be assumed to follow from pan-European structural mechanisms (Teschke and Knafo, forthcoming) or to naturally and gradually evolve out of the commercialisation of society (Wood, 2002a). Since capitalism arising out of medieval Europe was the exception rather than the rule, what has to be understood is the specificity of the historical process which uniquely occurred in England (Brenner, 1982; Comninel, 2000; McNally, 1988). PM suggested that the transition to capitalism was foremost a transformation of agents' relations to social institutions, such as the market or the state. Such transformation proceeded from contingent outcomes of specific social conflicts opposing lords and peasants in their access to products and production. This was a process which historically entailed the divorce of the peasantry from its means of subsistence, and uniquely transformed the traditional political constitution of the means of accumulation.

We could say, without already covering an issue which will be discussed across the thesis, that PM's 'Anglocentrism', which has been argued to lead it toward Eurocentrism (Wallerstein, 1999: 38-41), might also be its very strength. PM's initial and most important contribution has indeed been to argue against teleological and determinist theses on European uniqueness. PM did not simply replace 'Europe' by 'England' in a similarly flawed narrative, as Blaut (2000) suggested in his critique of Brenner. It rather proposed an innovative, agential conception of social change. Brenner's enquiries are however Eurocentred, to the extent that they have been largely based on differences amongst social property relations within Europe. This thesis seeks to expand the range of PM enquiries to differences within Eurasia. A key contribution of the California School has been to popularise works from Sinology demonstrating Imperial China's high level of urbanisation, commercialisation, and fertility control (Lee and Campbell, 1997; Li, 1988). This thus runs contrary to what would be expected from the 'Rise of the West' narratives, according to which such phenomena were European singularities. I claim that such discoveries must serve to further illustrate the various ways these market, familial, and rural-urban relations can be institutionalised in wider patterns of social relations. This reiterates the necessity for historical investigations of the variegated agential, and conflictual, relations by which the reproduction of social life is organised and contested. Here as in the 'transition debate', this has to be done prior to attributing logically derived consequences to such patterns. For it is

far from given that trade and demographic pressures lead to a causal, or pre-determined, outcome, and that they were sufficient conditions for the emergence of modernity. Such a perspective on the implications of the ‘Great Divergence’ debate reveals, I will argue, the close relation between this classic question of economic history and central IR issues, as they both make causal claims about the structural effects of commercial and demographic patterns on the international system.

The initial ‘Brenner Debate’ developed within the field of comparative social analysis, and has thus tended to ignore the geopolitical setting of the transition. Upon a call for integrating geopolitical elements into the ‘internalist’ studies of PM (Teschke, 2005), the approach has subsequently better defined the imbrications of the international relations of Europe with its social property regimes in the plural. PM has therefore made a crucial contribution on the manner in which the central categories of IR, namely the state and the international system, have historically emerged and have been theoretically constructed. This important debate divides into two tendencies of the California School broadly conceived, which moreover overlaps with the types of anti-Eurocentric strategies they mobilise. On one side, some contributors to the ‘Great Divergence’ debate have engaged with the definition of political and geopolitical forms attributed to the West, by retracing their origins to the non-Western world and/or by finding in such places social forms equivalent to those of Europe. This has led to the widening of some crucial IR categories, such as sovereignty (Hobson, 2009), world-systems (Abu-Loghod, 1989; Frank, 1998), or international systems (Buzan and Little, 2000), in order for them to be able to accommodate non-Western experiences. On the other side, those California Scholars who have not primarily sought to find in Asia proto-modern political and geopolitical forms traditionally associated with Western modernity, like Pomeranz and R. Bin Wong, have instead put forward the anti-Eurocentric strategy of ‘reciprocal comparison’. Such assessments of the West according to China’s criteria have, however, left intact the traditional framework of comparative enquiries.

My own, PM-informed, anti-Eurocentric strategy is the opposite of the ‘proto-modern’ strategy which generalises, through space and time, Western forms of development, which

are then taken as analytical starting points and referents for comparison. My approach simultaneously goes beyond Pomeranz and Wong's working with the conventional IR definitions of the concepts of international system and state as universal and transhistorical. I rather seek to radically historicise and specify the multiplicity of paths of state-formation within Europe, whilst emphasising the social origins of its geopolitical dynamics. The same method is used for deciphering the historical trajectory of Imperial China within its own geopolitical context. In this way, I aim to find the specificities of social institutions by conceptualising them as historical praxes, which in turn necessitates enquiries into the changing semantic meaning of concepts in their time/space contexts.

Moreover, my agency-led reconstruction of the variegated development of social institutions, such as authority relations and geopolitical orders, is crucial for avoiding the replacement of 'methodological nationalism' (or internalism) with 'methodological internationalism'. This characterises the California School's anti-Eurocentric strategies, which do not reflect epistemologically on their underlying assumptions of the universality of political development and political geography. This ultimately ontologises (Western) history, especially in the form of the expected effects of the 'international' (Teschke, 2014)<sup>7</sup>. For it might be the case that using this apparently neutral language as general abstraction, in order to make sense of diverse concrete historical developments, merely universalises categories based on a specific narrative of the European experience. Crucially, this assumes that the presence of structural variables, from the market and demographic patterns to hierarchical or anarchical orderings, leads to determined outcomes – and when they do not, this has to be explained by the 'deviation argument'<sup>8</sup>. Such 'general theories' were what led to the European uniqueness conundrum in the first place. In this light, specifying the agential and *sui generis* development of political and geopolitical orders, within Europe and Eurasia, is a key element to an anti-Eurocentric theory, and IR is the best place to argue for such a social theory of the 'international'.

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<sup>7</sup> I use the term 'ontologising' for strategies which reify historical processes by overlooking their social origins, and consequently give them the status of universal features of social life.

<sup>8</sup> This implies resorting to additional and exogenous factors in order to explain deviations from causal effects which are expected to be universal.

### **3. Plan of the thesis**

The theoretical part of the thesis aims to problematise the issue of Eurocentrism in IR works engaging with similarity and dissimilarity amongst the Western and the non-Western worlds. This is to be done, in turn, from the broader field of the three main traditions contributing to the ‘Rise of the West’ narratives; then to the Marxist tradition my analysis stems from; to, finally, the particular theoretical approach I operationalise in the thesis. This theoretical discussion leads me to affirm that contrasting understandings of the non-Western world derive from the different assumptions held about the European world, be it in the form of methodological assumptions deriving from the ontology of the world (the conditions of emergence of analytical categories); theories of history (change over time); or units of analysis (spatial constructions).

Chapter One submits the three main narratives on the ‘Rise of the West’ (neo-institutionalist economic history, neo-Weberianism, and World-Systems Theory (WST)) to a critique on the grounds that they exhibit the following characteristics of traditionally overlooked facets of Eurocentrism: (1) the naturalisation of the European international system; (2) the understanding of Europe as a homogenous entity; (3) the postulate of a universal rationality based on Western experience and; (4) the ontologising of analytical categories according to this same experience. It argues that the main challengers of this over-arching model, the California School, likewise failed to overcome Eurocentrism originally redefined this way, whilst being at the same time unable to sociologically re-problematise the origins of the ‘Great Divergence’.

Chapter Two evaluates how the theoretical tradition my thesis relies on, Marxism, has faced the issue of understanding the non-Western world, from Marx’s own works to contemporary understandings of the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) and the tributary mode of production. It is claimed that Marx’s work is amenable to multiple readings, especially regarding theories of history, and that an anti-Eurocentric understanding of Marx’s contribution should emphasise its historical, relational, and agential method.

Chapter Three examines the potential and pitfalls of my theoretical approach, PM, in relation to Eurocentrism. PM's specific understanding of Marxism is illustrated by locating its heritage and contributions in two core debates, within English Marxism (in social theory) and against Uneven and Combined Development (UCD) (in IR). Its anti-Eurocentric potential is argued to stem from its emphasis on class struggle and specificity, and its commitment to radically historicising analytical categories.

The empirical part of the thesis aims to reveal that, because they rely on Weberian-informed Sinology, IR works on China make empirical propositions which are not only invalid for the 2000 years of Chinese history they generally encompass, but also for all and each of the dynasties taken separately. This is accomplished by divorcing China's crucial social institutions from a sociology of power, which is exclusively applied in the European context. The organisation of the empirical chapters reflects this thesis' double objective of, on the one hand, showing the reification at work in the theoretical construction of Chinese difference in terms of political and geopolitical orders, and, on the other hand, providing an alternative historical account of its trajectory which radically politicises and historicises the 'state' and the 'international' as historically-created and contested social practices. My theoretical and historical enquiries into the history of China's allegedly more 'stable' eleven centuries proceed in two parts, chronologically separated by the transition from the Song dynasty to the Yuan dynasty. Each part begins with critical theoretical engagements with the main IR claims about the period in question. Chapters Four and Six are thus devoted to demonstrating the need for alternatives to the prevalent imposition of a modern vocabulary on Chinese social forms. Chapters Five and Seven offer reconstructions of China's history, concluding with a comparison with the trajectories of continental Europe, illustrating the similarities in their pre-modern, contested political geographies and uses of state power.

Chapters Four and Five enquire into Chinese social and geopolitical relations between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Chapter Four engages with works from Realism, the California School, and the English School via a critique of their ontologised categories of the Chinese World Order and the Confucian Order deemed to be at the root of China's divergence from Europe. The chapter interrogates what the 'international', 'empire', and 'state' socio-

historically meant for agents in Imperial China and proposes a phenomenology of ‘all under Heaven’ whereby such social forms are seen as arising from contentions around power, rather than being understood as geopolitical or normative givens. Chapter Five proceeds from there to a historical reconstruction of the Chinese trajectory during the Sui, Tang, ‘Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms’, and Song periods. The chapter retraces the social origins and variations of the institutions of the tribute-system and office-system, which are generally naturalised as stable features in the literature.

Chapters Six and Seven engage with Late Imperial China’s history between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. As this is the period the California School engages with, Chapter Six critically evaluates their application of the commercialisation model to China’s history. It suggests that a phenomenology of the administration through benevolence better reconstructs Chinese agents’ relations to crucial social institutions of the period, such as the market, lineages, and the not so stable and peaceful Confucian state. Chapter Seven provides a historical narrative, informed by these findings, of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties’ intertwined social-property-relations, contested authority relations, and wider geopolitical relations. It leads me to re-problematise the ‘non-rise’ of China not as a historical anomaly compared with Europe as a whole, but as an occurrence similar in this regard to continental Europe’s trajectory.

The thesis concludes by extrapolating the implications of the argument for understanding the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, that is the period of the ‘Great Divergence’ *per se* and the period which saw the West and China coming into closer contact. It is argued that the California and English Schools’ incapacity to explain China’s non-rise, and 19<sup>th</sup> Century decline, is closely linked to their reification of Imperial China’s history demonstrated throughout the thesis. Such IR works generally prove insufficiently critical of the Weberian-informed Sinology which has been incorporated within the classical neo-Weberian ontologising of the international. This ultimately reproduces, rather than contests, the ‘Rise of the West’ narratives’ dichotomised perspective on Europe and China. In contrast, my historical reconstruction discards any narrative based on the expected effects of structural or normative pressures by socialising their origins and contestations in order to comprehend

their *sui generis* constitutions and explain their divergent outcomes. In short, this provides IR theory with an alternative understanding of historical geographies of development and non-development.

A note on sources on China's history is needed before concluding this introduction. For reasons both of the type of enquiry and language fluency, the literature engaged with originates mostly from the Anglo-American world. This thesis also makes references to French scholars' original works, whether for their contributions to Sinology or to the AMP debate they formed an important part of. When available, translations of Chinese and Japanese historians' works are mobilised for the instances in which they have provided important contributions to the historiographical debates. Beyond the issue of language, the quality of sources on Imperial China obviously varies depending on the period, the region, and the type of events and processes. When deemed necessary, this will be an issue engaged with in the relevant empirical chapters. It has to be noted that historical enquiries have however been greatly facilitated following the opening of China's records and archives in the 1980s, most importantly the Ming-Qing Archives in Beijing (Bartlett, 2007). Although this thesis aims to a certain extent to contribute to a China-centered history, it mainly focuses on the way the legacy of the 'Rise of the West' narratives have framed the questions asked about, and the answers given to, China's 'divergence' in the English language dominated field of IR. In order to provide an alternative historical reconstruction of Imperial China's trajectory in light of this issue, available translated sources and works written in French or English have been considered, if not ideal, at least sufficient.



## **Chapter One – Beyond the Eurocentrism of the 'Rise of the West' and the 'Great Divergence' Narratives**

Narratives of the 'Rise of the West' prevalent in the social sciences have often been accused of presupposing the superiority of Europe by identifying inherent advantages, which have teleologically led to its prominence since the era of colonial empires. Postcolonial studies and a growing number of works clustered in the World History nebula argue that this Eurocentric perspective – common to the Liberal, Marxist, and Weberian literatures – embodies a blatant Orientalism that portrays the 'East' or the 'Rest' as the reverse image of European success. The actual picture is more subtle, but we must recognise that myths about the stagnation of the non-Western world are pervasive and that the analysis of its 'non-rise' is grounded in assumptions about what went 'right' in Europe.

There are many non-Western paths which are relevant for comparative enquiries into social development. The Indian subcontinent and the Near/Middle East have attracted particular attention, among other things for their enduring empires and extensive networks of exchange in the 'afro-Eurasian ecumene' (Hodgson, 1974). Yet, China is still given a prominent place in the literature, partly due to recent political reasons, and partly due to the academic puzzle of its highly civilised and long-lasting culture, imperial unity, and early bureaucratic structure. This is highlighted by the influential works of the California School, moreover stressing China's parity with early modern Europe in terms of 'living standards' and productivity. The renewed interest in the study of China carries in its wake the 'Great Divergence' question, and this involves the re-thinking of the 'Rise of the West' narratives' assumptions about an early European 'take-off' due to its inherent properties. The thesis likewise provides for a historical comparison between the trajectories of pre-modern Europe and Imperial China, albeit whilst grounding the reasons for their similarities on an eminently different postulate. I contend that, excluding the special case of Britain, both were cases of limited growth and contested political and geopolitical forms. I will argue for a comparative study leaving behind the ideal-typical opposition between an enlightened and dynamic Europe and a universal Chinese empire enabling or disabling growth. Before this, however, a review of traditional and anti-Eurocentric narratives on 'rise' and 'non-rise' is

needed in order to identify the Eurocentric pitfalls such a historical reconstruction must avoid.

The exceptional nature of the rise of Europe has been explained by reference to the presence of either Roman law, geopolitical competition, certain modes of production or types of government, geographical or environmental settings deemed to be favourable to secure property rights or the spread of new technologies or exchange relations (Anderson, 1974; Jones, 1981; Landes, 1998; Mann, 1986; North and Thomas, 1973; Tilly, 1990; Wallerstein, 1974; Weber, 1978). These characteristics, on their own or in variable combinations, have mostly been assumed as unique to Europe. HS has indeed been inward looking for a long time, and mainly focussing on European exceptionalism. In the last decade or so, following a growing unease with the absence of the non-European world in HS, there have been attempts to overcome these deficiencies, but I shall argue that they remain only partly successful as they do not sufficiently question their understanding of Europe.

Marx and Weber, the two main theoretical canons of HS, have been criticised as proponents of such European exceptionalism. Both their works entail an environmental determinism and rely on since-outdated empirical material (Anderson, 1974; Blaut, 2000), but their theories of history best illustrate their Eurocentric conceptions of the 'East'. Weber (1958) drew a causal relation between ethics of world religions and development, leading him to assert Western superiority in matters of rationality. Such 'idealist' stance sits uneasily with 'materialist' explanations of the emergence of Western modernity as the configuration of social relations or types of domination (Weber, 1978). Weber and scholars subsequently drawing on his work (e.g. Duchesne, 2011; Hall, 1986) thus picture the 'East' either through the claim that its religions froze state/society relations, or through the assertion of a patrimonial organisation of society unlike that of the West. In the more common understanding of Marx's Eurocentric view of the non-Western world, the 'East' is seen as stagnant, pertaining to the classless AMP, and at a stage of development less 'advanced' than that achieved by the West. Therefore, only upon the impetus of encounters with the West could the 'immutableness' of the East be overcome, the latter then being able to climb

the ladder of pre-defined stadial development. I shall demonstrate throughout this literature review that remnants of such Eurocentric conceptions of the ‘East’ still lurk in the works of contemporary Weberians and Marxists.

This chapter critically reviews the three traditions in social sciences informing the IR understanding of the problems of the ‘Rise of the West’ and, more specifically, of the divergence between China and Europe: (1) neo-institutionalist economic history; (2) neo-Weberian HS; (3) WST; and (4) the California School<sup>9</sup>. In evaluating their ability to avoid the charge of Eurocentrism, I will argue that they all fail to properly frame the comparative issue of China’s ‘Great Divergence’ because of their simplistic representation of ‘Europe’. Even the approach with the most promising anti-Eurocentric objective and potential, the California School, cannot evade this. Such misleading representations include: (1) the naturalisation of Europe’s ‘structural’ features leading to its political and military superiority; (2) the conception of Europe as a homogenous, internally un-differentiated spatio-temporal entity, thereby occluding its regionally and temporally specific ‘take-off’; (3) the un-problematised social origins of a specific type of rationality (i.e. *homo economicus*) assumed to diffuse in space and time to all institutions and dimensions, which is moreover held as a universal criteria; and (4) the bias towards universalised categories of analysis, whose congealing of historical praxes misleads comparative strategies and transferring of analytical categories to *sui generis* non-European cases.

This critique is based on PM’s empirical contributions and theoretical insights. On the one hand, Brenner’s distinction among variegated European trajectories in the early modern period questions the validity of the category of ‘Europe’. On the other hand, analytical and methodological implications of his account of the transition to capitalism in medieval England can be drawn for an anti-structuralist understanding of social change as open-ended conflicts around property and power. This sets the stage for the following theoretical chapters, in highlighting how such insights depart from the legacy of Eurocentrism in

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<sup>9</sup> Mode-of-production analyses of the ‘Rise of the West’, such as Anderson (1974) and Banaji (2010), also subscribed to the four Eurocentric pitfalls identified here. This will be discussed in Chapters Two and Three, which will address such challenges more specifically within the Marxist tradition, to which my own analysis subscribes. WST diverges sufficiently from analyses of modes to be discussed here.

Marx's own works and the wider Marxist tradition, and thereby allow for conceptually securing the basis of an alternative account of China's 'divergence' through a revision of PM. My overall argument is that the structuralist understandings of 'Europe' and 'China' as discernible spatial and temporal entities come at the cost of downplaying the socio-political contestations around property and power. Yet, these contestations are the key to understand China and Europe's similarities and differences, and to explain the ultimate sources of Europe's divergence from China (and not the other way around) following a long period of broadly similar developmental trajectories.

Following the further theoretical exploration of such overlooked Eurocentrism in Section One, pioneering works (Douglass North, Michael Mann, and Immanuel Wallerstein) and subsequent anti-Eurocentric applications of these three prominent traditions to the case of China (Eric Jones, Victoria Tin-bor Hui, and Eric Mielants) will be put under scrutiny. This literature review leads me to identify, as a conclusion to Section Two, a 'Rise of the West legacy' common to all these authors. Section Three introduces the contributions of Pomeranz and Wong. It highlights their limits in re-problematising the origins of the 'Great Divergence' due to their endorsing of the Eurocentric anachronisms to which the un-problematisation of social processes led the original 'Rise of the West' narratives.

### **1. The overlooked sources and consequences of European exceptionalism**

This section discusses facets of Eurocentrism insufficiently addressed by the literature focusing on this topic, Eurocentrism being broadly defined as the understanding of world history through the prism of European modernity. To four overlooked Eurocentric pitfalls uniquely theorised through PM insights, I oppose four critical anti-Eurocentric methodological claims.

The first pitfall is the naturalisation of Europe's *differentiae specifica*e, its international system. This un-problematisation of the social character of geopolitics, held to be a decisive factor in the 'Rise of the West', reifies a social feature into a naturalised characteristic supposed to explain the 'Great Divergence'. To this methodological conundrum, I oppose that the European geopolitical pluriverse has to be anchored in socio-political conflicts over

land and people. I argue for a move beyond the simple opposition between a European dynamic multi-state system to what amount to a geopolitical vacuum in Imperial China, due to the alleged absence of such a system. Space must be conceptualised as social praxis for each case.

Closely related to this is the understanding of 'Europe' as a homogenous category. All 'Rise of the West' narratives reviewed here see it as a Europe-wide phenomenon, located in its decentralised and fragmented character, and end in subsuming the fate of Europe as a whole under one ideal-type. Yet, comparative analysis shows that 'pan-European' structures, such as the 'international', far from isomorphising responses from polities, led them to diverge, due to the mediation of such processes through social conflicts. Recognising that capitalism emerged specifically in Britain, rather than this being a pan-European phenomenon, forces us to look for agential, rather than structural, origins to singular developmental paths.

The third problem with the literature on the 'Rise of the West' is the implicit postulate of a universal rationality, as experienced in Europe. To be Eurocentric, this does not need, however, to be the kind of Western superior rationality found in certain works of Weber (1958), or more recently of Duchesne (2011). Since this rationality is argued to originate in the Antique world, it becomes difficult to sociologically elucidate why only in the second half of the second millennium did this give birth to modernity. In the works evaluated here, rationality is postulated rather than explained. Moreover, it is postulated according to the specifically capitalist model of rationality. I contend that we must socialise and historicise specific rationalities by enquiring into the forms which power takes socio-historically and the socio-institutional contexts providing the background on which agents act from and upon, as they engaged into social activities which pitch them against other agents.

Finally, HS has not yet been able to come to terms with the issue of the ontologising of the categories of analysis. This is brought about by the reification of social processes, from the national/international to state/society and political/economy dichotomies. Such a transhistorical ontology is indeed based on the anachronistic universalisation of processes whose complex (and by no means absolute) formations pertain to European capitalist

modernity. A *sui generis* vocabulary revealing contestation around power – as embodied in polity and political geography in the pre-modern era - is needed to counter the timeless and abstract language of IR based on European modernity. This language has eluded agency and developmental specificities and created a series of anachronisms attributing universal interests to agents and transhistorical causal mechanisms to systems. This is why generic categories will be avoided in the thesis. Although useful as heuristic devices, concepts such as ‘state’, ‘territory’, ‘war’, ‘geopolitics’, ‘political’, and ‘economy’ necessitates the clarification of their meaning in specific places and time.

## **2. European ‘exceptionalism’ and the ‘Rise of the West’**

This section critically evaluates the traditional neo-institutionalist, neo-Weberian, and WST narratives on the rise of Europe so as to highlight the background against which subsequent HS has compared Chinese and European histories. All share reified conceptions of states, geopolitical environments, and agents’ motivation which are derived from their misinterpretation of the dynamics at work in the emergence of European modernity. I will conclude by laying out the theoretical foundations of the ‘Rise of the West legacy’ which leads these scholars to endorse Eurocentric anachronisms, both in their rendering of world history and in their analytical strategies.

### 2.1 Traditional economic history

For all their dissimilarities, North and Jones rekindled, outside their own field, interest in the ‘Rise of the West’ as a long-term process conceived in terms other than those of the emergence of the Industrial Revolution. For them, the ‘Rise of the West’ is related to ‘intensive’ economic growth, conceptualised as the rise of per capita income. Both retrace its genesis to the medieval era, by investigating the development of institutional arrangements conducive to such sustained growth.

#### 2.1.1 North and Thomas’ classical contribution

Using neoclassic economic theory, North and Thomas (1973) explain the ‘Rise of the West’ by the enforcement of property rights pertaining to an ‘efficient economic organization’ making the private and social rates of return correspond, i.e. encouraging economies of

scale and innovation and perfecting the functioning of the market by reducing transaction costs. Historically, these authors look for instances in which it was in the interest of governments to create and maintain such institutional arrangements. For them, demographic and trade expansion brought down feudalism across medieval Europe and created a market economy within nation-states. It was ultimately Holland and then Britain that succeeded during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in establishing the first institutions beneficial to the increase of productivity, as these states' strategies to augment their revenues coincided with the creation of efficient institutional arrangements. They thus build on postulates from both the commercial and demographic models, explaining the impact of such trends through a Rational Choice framework<sup>10</sup>.

This neoclassic economic model nonetheless implicitly based its argumentation on geopolitical factors. In unravelling the unique relation between growth and freedom in the West, North (1993: 12, 2005: 137) contends that the singularly fragmented character of Europe was the ultimate foundation of its distinctive trajectory, intervening as an exceptional source of constraints and opportunities. Firstly, the higher number of distinct political entities increased the chances that one would try policies conducive to growth. Secondly, Europe was more 'creative', due to the diffusion of innovations among its single-belief structure body (i.e. Christianity). Thirdly, its states were more compelled to 'do well', not only to ensure their survival - confronted as they were with fiscal crises induced by systemic war - but also due to the risk that wealthy 'constituents' might move elsewhere. Finally, North underlines the role of Europe's autonomous towns – autonomous due to the lack of a 'large scale order' that could monopolise decision-making processes. This autonomy legacy favoured the bargaining of revenues in return for property rights and control over taxation. By contrast, centralised China stagnated because none of these incentives for the ruler to enforce property rights were present in the long run. China thus figures at the end of the scale of the 'democratisation' of policy-making (North, 1993: 8-9), as even more 'despotic' than the Spanish Crown.

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<sup>10</sup> Rational Choice Theory has its roots in neoclassic economics (Becker, 1976; Buchanan, 1969; Olson, 1965). It is characterised by its methodological individualism and its use of game theory. In a nutshell, abstract individuals seeking the maximisation of their gains should make rational decisions towards this goal based on a set of preferences and information.

This generalising thesis faces many pitfalls. In the first place, North over-estimates the propensity of a freer 'market economy' to naturally create incentives to specialise and innovate simply through the increase of trade, something which is characteristic of the commercial model (Wood, 1994). Moreover, the reliance of this theory on the demographic model<sup>11</sup> renders it unable to explain the diversity of outcomes to which similar instances of population growth and decline led<sup>12</sup>. The same critique applies to their factor of unevenly successful bargaining with representative bodies. They provide little historical evidence of this causal relation (Jones, 1974). There is no real attempt to comprehend the very different political relations, among European entities, between central powers and cities or 'representative bodies', in order to back this very general theoretical claim.

More generally, incentives for actors to act rationally, in terms of economic behaviour, are assumed to follow from the removal of feudal impediments. In North's narrative, merchants and powerful representative bodies had naturally known best which property rights were inherently conducive to growth – the rights guaranteeing an open market and exclusive rights to use labour, land, and capital without others benefiting from it, as opposed to the Crown's privileging of guilds and monopolies. However, North leaves open the crucial issue of understanding why certain actors would prefer some rights over others, an issue that only inquiries into different socio-economic organisations can engage with. Were all landlords or merchants fighting for the same rights all across Europe? In short, as in many works inspired by the rational choice model, omniscient and abstract individuals abide by transhistorical and de-contextualised objectives.

### 2.1.2 Jones' *European 'Miracle'* and the Chinese instance of *Recurring Growth*

Unsatisfied with North and Thomas' attempt which was weakened by the impossibility to corroborate its generalisations due to the absence of a class of phenomena like the Western

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<sup>11</sup> This model has been popularised by Postan (1966) and Ladurie (1966). According to such a Malthusian model applied to pre-industrial societies, demographic 'checks' naturally arise after population increases due to the need for more land in limited-growth economies, leading to cyclical patterns of long-term economic development.

<sup>12</sup> Jones (1989: 33) adds that North cannot explain why the Chinese high population density did not lead to similar patterns as in Europe.



experience, Jones opts for a comparative study. He adopts this strategy to provide for general, i.e. ‘non-local’, explanations for recurring (intensive) growth, a phenomenon which did not occur only in the West. More than mere counter-examples, China and Japan are crucial instances in the discovery of answers to the growth riddle, requiring an understanding of reversions to extensive growth as well as successful long-term intensive growth. Only Europe managed to thwart ‘negative forces’, i.e. rent-seeking behaviour, a necessary step for sustained intensive growth. Europe’s ‘competitive politics’ succeeded in taming rent-seeking behaviour natural to kings. Economic change and innovation are ultimately explained by (geo)political factors (Jones, 1981: 125, 1989: 177)<sup>13</sup>: the amalgam of competition for subjects and power among states and within them. The European geopolitical pluriverse led to the creation of singular types of governments which were conducive to intensive growth. However, Jones insists carefully that the endurance of the state-system is in itself a ‘miracle’, in the sense of it being an ‘aberration’ (Jones, 1981: 225).<sup>14</sup> Caught by the imperatives introduced by the state-system, European states were more (economically) ‘purposeful’ compared to their Asian counterparts (Jones, 1981: 110) and less prone to despotism.<sup>15</sup>

Since the standard economic indicators (such as income per head) are hard to establish for these pre-industrial eras, Jones (1989: 30-39, 169-170) favours the examination of broad trends to deduce the presence of growth, such as a century-long increase of consumption, the use of new techniques, the increase of productive work outside the agricultural sector, and structural changes such as industrialisation. All these, and more, were also found in Song China (960-1279), as well as a balance between the creation of public goods and freedom of the market that came close to Europe’s later achievements. This progress,

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<sup>13</sup> However much emphasis Jones puts on tracing the portrait of environmental settings as well as religion and culture, they still merely shaped the form of growth, without being its origin (e.g. Jones, 1989: 176; 87-106). Technical changes are viewed as depending on the socio-political structure and not as a source of transformation (e.g. Jones, 1989: 72).

<sup>14</sup> He infers its ‘positive’ effect on growth from history and not from some *a priori*.

<sup>15</sup> Jones’ argument is similar to North’s third argument outlined above. Constant military threat and the permanent ‘exit option’ of their populations led European states to negotiate with groups (foremost merchants). Economic change is foremost seen as a Europe-wide phenomenon: ‘The emergent nation states were too alike in fundamentals, and too good at imitating one another, too affected by the same stimuli’ to give rise to the need to differentiate among them, which would amount to the trees overshadowing the forest (Jones, 1989: 39, 169).

however, was halted by the Mongol invasions, and with no European-like aristocracy or merchants putting pressure on the central government, this kind of single empire was content with 'balanced non-intensive growth' powered by spatial expansion (Jones, 1989: 142).

Jones identifies a clear occurrence of massive achievements in the non-Western world. However, Jones' insufficient problematisation of agents' motives results in analytical anachronisms which hinder his comparison between Europe and China. The liberal assessment of the European nobility as the opposite of 'rapacious interests' (i.e. as contrary to rent-seeking behaviours) and of merchant groups as promoting the 'end of arbitrariness' disregards the persisting personalised character of states and the economy of political privileges in Europe. Europe was no different in this regard from China. Precisely because they were caught in a pre-modern 'state-system' (Teschke, 2003), the European states were the opposite of a 'lean government' rationalising its governance and strengthening its economy through a 'growth ethic', extracting less and returning more (Jones, 1989: 132-133, 176-177).

In Jones' work, the 'proper' balance between a freer market and public goods is both an indicator of intensive growth and the causal explanation of its emergence. This confusion is due to the fact that Jones (1989: 47) explicitly claims that there is a natural tendency for growth to go from being extensive to intensive. On the one hand, this thesis sits uneasily with Jones' explanation of successful recurrent growth in Europe. In North's as in Jones' narrative, what is ultimately at the core of the 'Rise of the West' conceived in terms of an increase in productivity is the granting of political rights arising from pressures emanating from interaction within a system of plural polities. On the other hand, this inclination to presuppose rather than to explain social processes is especially prone to Eurocentrism, as the advantages of Europe then become the *explanans* rather than the *explanandum*. In the end, Jones has to resort to an external, contingent, and naturalised feature as the explanation of success or failure in this natural tendency toward sustained growth: military pressures indirectly kept in check rent-seeking behaviour (in Europe) and invasion indirectly unleashed it (in China).

## 2.2 Historical Sociology

In contrast to economic historians, HS focuses on the rise of nation-states rather than growth *per se*. Neo-Weberian HS is primarily concerned with the emergence of Western macro-social processes such as state-formation, war, and revolution (Skocpol, 1979; Tilly, 1975, 1992).

### 2.2.1 Mann's geopolitical model

Mann's contribution to the explanation of European exceptionality in the very long term (going farther back than the 11<sup>th</sup> Century) is his theory of social power. According to Mann, power takes four forms in which networks are overlapping: ideological, economic, military and political (the IEMP model). These forms of power can be deployed in extensive or intensive ways, and in authoritative or diffuse manners.<sup>16</sup> Theoretically, Mann posits four fundamental needs of human society and investigates historically how they gave rise to different forms of social power, each according to its own logic. Society was being complexified as these distinct collective goals gave rise to institutionalised social stratification.<sup>17</sup>

The emergence of the European capitalist nation-states, as a 'gigantic series of coincidences' (Mann, 1986: 504), happened at the intersection of cumulative changes within each of these spheres. Three processes ('preconditions') culminated in the centralised and territorialised national state, characterised by its military and fiscal

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<sup>16</sup> Ideological power pertains to the organisation of meaning, rituals and norms. Mann (1986: 24) defines economic power as 'the satisfaction of subsistence needs through the social organisation of the extraction, transformation, distribution, and consumption of the objects of nature'. Military power is understood as the organisation of defence and aggression. Political power refers to 'regulations and coercion centrally administered and territorially bounded – that is, to *state* power' (Mann, 1986: 26). Extensive power designates the size of the population and territory which power can reach, while intensive power refers to the extent of the mobilisation and organisation of people. Power is authoritative when it imposes compliance, and it is diffused when adhesion is spontaneous and un-coerced.

<sup>17</sup> Mann defines such distributive power as 'exploitative', i.e. the power of one actor over another in a division of labour. This power derives from the implementation of 'functional', collective power deployed towards accomplishing collective goals.

efficiency and coordinating power, especially in its ‘organic’ form<sup>18</sup>: (1) the (‘necessary’) ‘normative pacification’ of Christianity; (2) the medieval local dynamism which rendered the economy intensive; and (3) the decentralised yet competitive geopolitical structure of Europe. Mann (1986: 377, 526) delivers the answer to the neo-classic riddle in providing an explanation of the kind of regulation necessary for competition. Once the actors are set in an ‘acephalous’ social organisation, providing a minimal order without unleashing political predation over economic resources, capitalism arises out of exchange. Once set going, this maturation of the economy gave birth to capitalist classes’ in need of more regulation, which coincided with states’ increasing need for more revenues in a context of geopolitical competition. The singular European reliance on Christianity, as the source of an ‘infrastructure of extensive power’, is opposed to the ‘compulsory cooperation’ (imperial) path that the non-Western world followed. China figures as an ideal-type (out of four covering socio-institutional arrangements throughout world history) of strong despotic power with low infrastructural power (Mann, 1986: 538).<sup>19</sup>

Lack of problematisation of distributive power, however, results in the absence of any analysis of the social basis of the power of agents. Such an enquiry would undermine Mann’s theoretical assumptions about the dissociation of the economic and the political as different logics in pre-capitalist societies (Brenner, 2006).<sup>20</sup> Mann indeed postulates the *a priori* separation of the multiple realms of the social world in his analysis (based on the fetishisation of the formal dissociation between the economic and the political in capitalism), before the historical evaluation of its conditions of possibility (Wood, 1981). In addition, such a model leads to over-determination and poor explanation, the juxtaposition of cumulative phenomena belonging to each sphere dissolving in pure empiricism. In short,

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<sup>18</sup> Organic states are those that are ‘nearly-unitary’, collaborating with dominant classes so as to become ‘the centralized organizer of a ruling class’ (Mann, 1986: 416) and taking the role of ‘normative pacification’ upon themselves. They thus have extended infrastructural reach and social mobilisation. Britain is an early example of such a state.

<sup>19</sup> This ideal-type is argued to cover all China’s history, crudely encapsulated under ‘three relatively early bursts of social development (Han, Tang, and Song), followed by dynastic cycles, stagnation, and eventual decay’ (Mann, 1986: 538). Mann’s references to the non-Western world are scarce, since he renounces classic Neo-Weberian comparative sociology.

<sup>20</sup> In such societies, Mann however has to recognise empirically that the contested institutionalisation of social power based on exclusion relies on unequal means to implement it – which is, in the case of pre-capitalist economic appropriation, ‘extra-economic’ means.

Mann's findings on the exceptional European degree of autonomy of spheres (on which his comparison with China is based) are historically problematic. Not only does this reify the 'economy', but also the 'international', the second exceptional European feature crucial to Mann's understanding of the European miracle.

Mann's Realist conception of the international has been qualified as 'a simplistic 'M-alone' model of the international' (Halliday, 2006: 513; Hobson, 2006; Hobson and Hobden, 2002). It cannot be otherwise and cannot be resolved from an IEMP perspective, since the international is '*logically* derivative' from the territorialised and centralised circumscription of the political (Lapointe and Dufour, 2011: 14). Mann's model lacks a 'social theory of war' (Teschke, 2003), and thus an analysis of the genealogy of medieval elites' strategies of reproduction of their social power. Their transhistorical and predetermined objectives are reminiscent of the Rational Choice model. Consequently, it becomes difficult to understand the variations in domestic responses to similar 'international' dynamics. Mann's ultimate conflation of despotic/infrastructural states under one ideal-type illustrates this (Teschke, 2003: 122). Since this is an a-socialised ontological given, geopolitical competition falls outside the explanatory reach of the model. Yet, de-essentialising such alleged European 'exceptionalisms', by understanding them as social practices, is a crucial step toward overcoming Eurocentrism.

### 2.2.2 The Chinese state-system

Hui (2005) seeks to circumvent the Eurocentric interrogations of HS by arguing that their theses should also be able to properly explain the Chinese trajectory, i.e. beyond its conceptualisation as an anomaly or deviance from the Western path considered as the basis of what social development should be. Hui builds simultaneously on the works of IR Realists, the HS of Charles Tilly, and system and Rational Choice theories. Hui's primary objective is to understand why similar interstate competitive environments in Ancient China (the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, from 770 to 221 BC), and early modern Europe (1495-1815), led to two different results: modern sovereignty or universal empire. According to her, diverging outcomes in terms of state-formation occurred due to the manner in which 'domination-seekers' ('state') and their 'targets' ('society') reacted to

the opportunities and constraints arising from the ‘international’<sup>21</sup>.

In China, the successful contender of this early state-system, the Qin state (221-206 BC), ultimately achieved a universal empire because of its ‘self-strengthening reforms’ (increasing ‘state capacity’ through monopoly over the means of violence and rationalisation of administration and taxation), combined with ruthless strategies of domination against contending states. We thus see the emergence of an early bureaucratic state<sup>22</sup>. Hui turns the conventional narrative of European success on its head: in similar contexts, it was China which adopted the more ‘successful’ methods to enhance state power. However, those “unmistakingly ‘modern’ practices and institutions” (Hui, 2005: 222-223) did not last as the ‘countervailing mechanisms’ of resistance and rising costs caught up with the empire. It then resorted to ‘self-weakening’ methods like European states undertook (dependence on other resources-holders such as mercenaries, money-lenders, tax-farmers, and offices-buyers). From then onwards, Imperial China encountered succeeding periods of unification and division<sup>23</sup>. As in Europe, in periods of division or during the reign of weak rulers, two phenomena occurred: ‘state-society bargains’ (material welfare, legal protection, and freedom of expression ensuring the cooperation of the people for war and preventing their use of the ‘exit option’), and prosperity through trade (the state being too weak to impede it). This is opposed to universal empires’ repression and rising cost. In short, war pressures induced ‘liberty and prosperity’, while the absence thereof, upon the achievement of ‘universal empire’, led to ‘totalitarianism’ (Hui, 2007).

Hui does not succeed in building the agential theory she seeks because of the Eurocentric anachronisms which sneak back in through her conceptions of the ‘state-society’ and ‘international-domestic’ dichotomies. The explanatory weight allegedly put on the bargains that ‘domestic’ agents achieved, the choices of reforms that were made, and the conflictual

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<sup>21</sup> Five causal mechanisms governed international politics: state reforms, political stratagems, balance of power, rising costs of expansion and administration, and counterbalancing strategies. The type of reforms undertaken is in turn explained by timing, initial and environmental conditions, and path-dependence.

<sup>22</sup> See also Zhao (2004) and Kiser and Cai (2004).

<sup>23</sup> Hui does not sufficiently address the question of the source of this alternation between division and unification in Imperial China beyond the Ancient period. She falls prey to the flaws in traditional Sinology’s ‘dynastic cycles paradigm’, to be criticised in Chapter Four.

relations between ‘domination-seekers’ and ‘targets’ (Hui, 2005: 34) rapidly disappears, in favour of ‘historical-institutionalist’ factors and ‘initial and environmental conditions’ constraining agency. The reason she has to resort to such naturalised factors is that her Tillyian definition of resource-holders, ‘society’, does not allow her to identify their motives and therefore the object of their struggle with the ‘state’ – i.e. over the social surplus extracted from producers, an agent totally obliterated from her HS. As with Mann, the ‘international’ logic compels ‘reforms’. By neglecting to theorise why this is so – because ‘governing’ was enmeshed in simultaneous exploitation and domination dynamics in pre-modern eras – both authors resort to a dichotomised and simplistic vision of geopolitics, in which the ‘international’ exists in the form of a state-system – and thus compels reactions - or does not exist at all. In the latter case, geopolitics completely vanishes from the theory and ‘domination’ is then seen as exercised against ‘domestic’ actors, therefore conforming to another logic. This stems from an anachronistic conception of pre-modern spatiality and a decontextualised conception of agents’ rationality characteristic of neo-Weberian HS.

### 2.3 World-Systems Theory

Even if he shares with ‘Rise of the West’ narratives the analysis of a Europe-wide phenomenon, Wallerstein innovates by theorising hierarchy. WST proposes an account of unequal international relations and their impact on the development of states, preserving from the *Annales* tradition the study of the *longue durée* and the global scale.<sup>24</sup> In Wallerstein's work, the world-system, characterised by its autonomy and its role in structuring the division of labour, is conceived as the only analytical unit enabling us to grasp the dynamic of interaction between societies. World-economies and world-empires are defined by the dimensions that link together the societies of a world-system, respectively economic or political-military networks. World-empires, in which economy is devoted to sustaining bureaucracies, are governed by logics of expansion and contraction, until their decline due to imperial over-reach. The contrasting European world-economy emerged out of the crisis of feudalism, which was resolved by territorial expansion. This

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<sup>24</sup> WST indeed builds partly on the Dependency School (Amin, 1970; Frank, 1969) and the French *École des Annales* (Braudel, 1969, 1979).

started a new social form, capitalism, based on the specialisation of economies according to the world-market mechanism. The core states backed up this process of exploitation of the peripheral regions, firstly in Eastern Europe and then the New World. Europe's unique path results from this resolution of the crisis of feudalism through spatial domination in the absence of the threat of a return to a world-empire.

From its original emergence around the 16<sup>th</sup> Century (Wallerstein, 1974), the modern capitalist world-economy has been traced back to an earlier point in the East by others, among them Janet Abu-Lughod (1989) and Andre G. Frank (1998).<sup>25</sup> Another trend following more closely the WST framework backdates the origins of the modern world-economy to the inter-city-state system of 'commercial capitalism'. According to Mielants (2007), a reorganisation of the economy began the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. The growing influence of the city-state system and its monetarisation and specialisation of the economy made the capitalist logic gradually erode the feudal mode, throwing it into crisis. This process was first started by European merchants using the city-state infrastructure and resources to peripheralise the countryside in this early division of labour, as a prelude to the later world-economy operating through the state-system. Such early correlation of weak rural nobility and strong bourgeoisie (in autonomous cities) forms the 'backbone' of the latter's integration into representative assemblies, which enabled them to use this political power for the establishment of a spatially deployed division of labour (Mielants, 2002). Mielants' (2000, 2007) interest in China resides in the fact of its failure to 'take-off' despite its greater commercialisation and urbanisation than Europe. He concludes that city-states imposed a very different 'path dependence' on Europe (whose revenues were drawn from merchants, bargaining in return for political power) than did the world-empire in China (an agrarian empire of taxation).

WST forces us to think about the implications of the rise and decline of geopolitical orders, as they were obviously plural and not only a property of the West. Contrary to previous

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<sup>25</sup> Frank's work will be discussed at length in Chapter Six, alongside that of the California School, a labelling that Frank has been given (Goldstone, 2000) and has accepted (Frank, 2001). Abu-Lughod and Frank depart from Wallerstein's work by discarding the notion of transition from a mode of production and favouring instead a narrative of the shift in hegemony.



approaches, WST views Europe as less of a homogeneous entity, for hierarchy divides it into a core, semi-peripheries and peripheries, according to their labour-regimes. However, the theory has no historical explanation for the emergence of either the state-system or capitalism - its two core concepts and conditions of possibility for the world-economy -, let alone of their concatenation (Teschke, 2006). On the one hand, WST resorts to the commercialisation model's explanation of the origins of capitalism as a result of the cumulative accumulation of riches. The 'Rise of the West' is still a pan-European process in which capitalism naturally emerges at the interstices of the previous social organisation whenever market exchange relations are allowed to mature (Wood, 2002). However, it is far from evident whether there was an inherent link between the decline of feudalism and the emergence of capitalism (Dobb, 1950: 33-82), and whether the former was a homogenous and temporally coincidental process within Europe (Brenner, 1991, 1995). As for Liberal and neo-Weberian narratives, the WST perspective on the emergence of Western modernity is about what did not prevent it from arising, such as imperial integration (e.g. in China). This transforms capitalism into the destiny of the whole world, thereby reiterating the Eurocentrism of naturalising the EuroAmerican trajectory (Dirlik, 1999).

On the other hand, WST contends that state forms and economic models are conferred according to their location within the global system of exchange. This functionalism prevents us from conceptualising the constitution and transformation of types of regimes and socio-spatial orders as politicised processes. On this epistemological level, since it is the system (and not its units) which is capitalist, this blurs enquiries into the source of social change. The conflation of the ontological and empirical categories of the world-system renders its existence presupposed (McMichael, 1990), preventing the problematisation of Europe's allegedly exceptional sustained geopolitical pluriverse.

#### 2.4 The 'Rise of the West' legacy

This literature review has evaluated overlooked facets of Eurocentrism in the three main 'Rise of the West' narratives. I argue that there is a common legacy in their diverse methodologies: that the transhistorical ascription of economic/political and inside/outside differentiations results in narratives of historical continuity and Eurocentric conceptual

anachronisms. These scholars indeed elevate the socio-historical processes they attribute to European modernity to the rank of analytical *a priori*s. These two features of the ‘Rise of the West’ are not only naturalised, but extrapolated as universal strategies of investigation. More broadly, the legacy of the ‘Rise of the West’ narrative ends in an inconclusive relation between theory of history, an insufficiently agential conception of social transformation, and a deficient understanding of the socio-spatial dimension.

Put simply, these narratives assume an (at least Western) European homogeneity that stems from its fragmented character or insertion into the state-system. Universal responses to such stimuli in turn foster trade, growth, or capitalism and a unique state form, defined by its representative character. This European exceptionality is then contrasted with China, which is conceptualised as ridden by rent-seeking and despotic tendencies, in the absence of their inhibition by (European-like) competition within and between states or among classes propelling the merchants to the front of the stage. What characterises these narratives is the absence of a theorisation of the international and of capitalism as social practices and relations put in place by struggles around power. I have critiqued in turn: (1) the Liberal blurring of power relations; (2) the neo-Weberians’ arbitrary ascription of power to disconnected spheres; and (3) WST’s spatial deployment of power in a social vacuum. Each of these theories ignores the multifaceted deployment of socio-spatial relations and the articulation of the ‘international’ by variegated social institutions and dynamics. This dramatises the East/West divide, radically backdates the rationality of European states, and conflates very diverse social trajectories into one (medieval-to-modern) Europe-wide logic. Their non-provision of a social definition of capitalism is symptomatic of its being taken for granted, as something occurring naturally alongside the increase of commerce. Presupposing rather than explaining these crucial features in their narratives does not allow them to go beyond a mere checklist of absent forms when it comes to understanding the ‘non-rise’ of China.

The theorisation of these phenomena as socio-historical processes in contrast allows for the comprehension of the impact of the politicisation of the economy and trade and of the grounding of the ‘international’ in pre-capitalist dynamics. This has two consequences.

Firstly, it reveals as a methodological dead-end the analysis of world history based on dissociated dimensions of social life, prior to the socio-historical conditions of possibility of their constitution as such, and its corollary elevation to a cognitive device. Secondly, it stresses the need for a reassessment of the East/West dichotomy and the presupposition of a European homogeneity. The appreciation of international dynamics as inherently social reveals that there is no simple causality between the working of the ‘international’ logic and state-formation along homogenous and rational lines. Thinking along lines of the presence or absence of a state-system and the presupposition of outcomes thereof precludes an understanding of the socio-spatial dimension of political entities as a crucial instance of the reproduction of social relations. This needs to be recovered historically. Only historical investigation of conflicts around power, conceived as simultaneously social and spatial, can explain the specificities of these trajectories and counter the myth of any inherent long-term European superiority, by stressing non-teleological historical outcomes and demystifying European homogeneity. Thus, I argue that, on a general level, China and most European political entities partook of the same pre-capitalist dynamics far beyond the agreed-upon timeframe of the ‘Rise of the West’. Let us turn to this argument’s similarities and differences with the project of the California School.

### **3. Overcoming the ‘Rise of the West’ Debate? The ‘California School’**

The California School (also qualified as ‘revisionist’ or ‘neo-Smithian’) is part of a wider anti-Eurocentric perspective also associated with the works of Jack Goldstone, John M. Hobson, and Frank. These anti-Eurocentric scholars challenge the idea of European long-term superiority and argue for a ‘Eurasian similarity’ until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century ‘Great Divergence’. Pomeranz and Wong are prominent figures of this approach, drawing on the empirical works of Li Bozhong (1985) and James Lee (Lee and Campbell, 1997; Lee and Wang, 1997). Their comparison between China and Europe seeks to show that neither part of Eurasia was on its way to becoming modern and to being able to sustain economic growth before 1800.

The California School has done extraordinary work putting Chinese history on the IR agenda whilst demystifying its perceived stagnation. A long overdue comparison of the

European and Asian trajectories has been renewed beyond the traditional mobilisation of the latter as a mere counter-example of European exceptionalism, which has indeed often been ‘nothing but a measure of the existing ignorance with regard to the history of the rest of the world’ (de Vries, 2010: 8). Wong (1997) introduced the method of ‘reciprocal comparison’, which aims to switch from comparing world history and the abstract model of European development taken as the norm to a ‘two-ways’ comparison of historical models. This is more an insight and warning than an innovative method *per se*. It stresses the necessity to compare the ‘West’ to the ‘East’ by the developmental criteria of the latter, without assuming the superiority of the former. If we push forward this insight, this opens the door to historical enquiry into the ways pre-19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe resembled Imperial China, turning the tables on both classical enquiries into ‘Eastern’ deviations from an idealised Western path (e.g. Landes, 1998), and the anti-Eurocentric strategy of searching for proto-forms of Western development earlier in the ‘East’ (e.g. Hobson, 2004).

Overall, the California School is right in stressing that no pan-European uniqueness rendered it on the verge of a breakthrough during the early modern period, and that China had found equally innovative ways to cope with the systematic resource crises characteristic of pre-modern economies. However, the approach faces similar pitfalls to the ‘Rise of the West’ legacy: it assumes as an analytical *a priori* the working of international and economic logics, and therefore puts forward an ontology in which European historical processes are universalised. I shall argue that the California School ultimately fails for this reason to explain why China and England (or Europe) ‘accidentally’ diverged. In contrast, investigating power relations and the historical outcomes of these never-ending contentions around the definition of the form power took allows for both explaining the specificities of Chinese and European trajectories as well as preserving some explanatory power for the emergence of capitalist modernity - as one of these resolutions of social conflicts. Such outcomes are neither accidental nor contingent, but ‘unpredictable and only retrospectively intelligible’ through enquiries into agents’ struggles to maintain their social power (Teschke, 2003: 79). I will first review the debate in economic history sparked by Pomeranz’s ‘*Great Divergence*’ before turning to Wong’s theses, which widened the debate on Chinese and European political trajectories.

### 3.1 Pomeranz's 'Great Divergence'

In emphasising the sudden and late character of the 'Rise of the West', Pomeranz wishes to reverse the traditional mode of enquiry by demonstrating that Europe was on the Chinese path until contingent elements intervened. He contends that a series of socio-economic indicators were more or less the same until 1800 at those two ends of Eurasia (life expectancy, calorie intake, wage levels, standard of living, household income and production and consumption rates). Other similarities include techniques of birth control, free land and labour markets, science and technologies, property rights, and proto-industrialisation. Such indices of 'Smithian growth' followed demographic growth which promoted the expansion of commerce, specialisation, and division of labour. However, Europe and China were both approaching a 'proto-industrial cul-de-sac', as they faced the inevitable environmental constraints of pre-modern development, highlighted by the classic political economists. 'Luck' then favoured Britain as it was able to overcome this increasingly limited pool of resources and land by switching to an 'inorganic economy' (due to its easily extractable coal located near the metropolis), and by importing resources and land-intensive products from the New World (Pomeranz, 2000: 66, 185).

Pomeranz has been criticised for his misguided use of data in support of his argument (Allen *et al*, 2011; Broadberry and Gupta, 2005; Brenner and Isett, 2002; Bryant, 2006; Huang, 2002). Most notable is his predilection for comparing land productivity rather than labour productivity, despite the widespread acceptance of the latter as indicator of sustained growth. Pomeranz' argument assumes a universal economic rationality to agents naturally investing in productive endeavours. Due to his neglect of the reasons why and the manners by which people use techniques or manufacture products, Pomeranz misses the 'already existing divergence' (Brenner and Isett, 2002: 613) between Britain and the rest of the world, be it the European continent or China. What distinguished Britain was indeed its systematic implementation of techniques and technologies to increase labour productivity (instead of requiring labour intensification, as in China).<sup>26</sup> Chinese proto-industrialisation

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<sup>26</sup> Chinese agricultural techniques, such as weeding, the use of a second fertilizer made of soybeans, and

was powered by an increase of labour input per unit of land to obtain subsistence requirements, and thus part of a wider ‘involution’ (the decrease of marginal return per unit of labour).<sup>27</sup> An opposite factor, labour productivity, was rising in Britain well before the Industrial Revolution<sup>28</sup>, and its economic development was following a distinct pattern that did not necessitate traditional land expansion, labour intensification, or demographic checks to keep it going.

The overall problem with Pomeranz’s study is that he looks for an arguably incalculable quantitative level at which a capital-intensive and technological-oriented economy becomes more advantageous than a land- and labour-intensive economy, instead of searching for the social relations that favour this path. To be sure, ‘How important coal and the New World will seem depends partly on how convinced readers are of the similarities I [Pomeranz] have suggested in other areas’ (Pomeranz, 2002b: 445). The answer to which is: not at all if we understand the important similarities not in terms of standards of living and similar quantitative measures, but in terms of the social relations conducive to labour productivity and thus increase in productivity per capita (i.e. rendering specialisation and innovation inevitable for agents subject to the imperatives of the market). The use of coal and new techniques, and the extension of new areas for cultivation, do not naturally follow a logic that favours the rise of GDP per capita. The question Pomeranz fails to ask is: what social relations were needed so that coal and resources from the colonies made the difference they did in the British economy? In the end, under Pomeranz’ impetus, the California School shares with neo-institutionalism their conception of growth (as the natural evolution of a commercial society, when it was not facing shortages of land and resources to transform) and a de-socialised conception of agents. To these similarities, Wong will add the re-introduction of the ‘double competition’ thesis.

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double-cropping (winter wheat), all required more labour-power and were used to maintain the previous level of production when the subdivided lands were not able to yield enough grain to feed the inhabitants (Huang, 1985, 1990).

<sup>27</sup> Once again due to the subdivision of holdings among children, peasants resorted to rural manufacture, such as weaving, to buy grains when they were not able to produce sufficient food on their land.

<sup>28</sup> According to Brenner and Isett (2002: 627), ‘Between 1500 and 1750, agricultural labor productivity grew by between 52 and 67 percent (Allen 2000, 20, table 8; Wrigley 1985, 720, table 10). Its trajectory thus diverged sharply and decisively from that of virtually all of the rest of Europe in this period, reaching, for example, a level that was double that of France by 1750 (see below, Table 5).’

### 3.2 Wong and Rosenthal's return to European uniqueness

While Pomeranz (2000: 12, 66) contends with the European exceptionalism argument by highlighting Britain's 'geographic good luck', Wong in his latest work introduces political analysis, alongside Pomeranz's resource-based comparison, and looks beyond 19<sup>th</sup> Century contingencies to explain the divergent paths of Europe and China. However, as in Pomeranz' work, industrial capitalism is the crucial 'fundamental transformation of society and economy' (Wong, 1997: 17). It shares a 'casual rather than causal' and 'historical' rather than 'logical' connection with the economic pattern it was born in, since such Smithian growth was not exclusive to the pioneer zone of the Industrial Revolution (Wong, 1997: 52; Wong, 1999: 220). In *China Transformed*, the necessary precondition for the Industrial Revolution's eventual overcoming of Malthusian constraints was technology (or forces of production). This is understood as an 'exogenous variable', unrelated to 'relations of production', since the Chinese Smithian growth did not lead to such a cluster of technologies (Wong, 1997: 53-58). Despite this causal role of technology associated with industrialism, Wong does not enquire into the social origins of technological innovation, his analysis consequently relying ultimately on a version of techno-determinism.

In his later work, Wong (Rosenthal and Wong, 2012) draws on another underlying part of his previous argument on the uniqueness of European state-formation to explain this European proneness to technological innovation. Ruling out a series of conventional explanations for the European take-off,<sup>29</sup> Rosenthal and Wong fall back upon what amounts to the most decisive dissimilarity between Europe and China: their socio-spatial constitution, i.e. as a state-system or an empire. Neither political geography was better suited for development in general. On the one hand, the Chinese empire encountered an early Smithian development, due to its exceptionally large domestic market. In such a peaceful environment, its rulers were free to concentrate on social welfare, which resulted in light taxation, little interference in the economy, and the provision of a large number of

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<sup>29</sup> Rosenthal and Wong claim a difference in degree rather than in kind between Chinese and European population dynamics and households, economic institutions, manufacturing, financing of production and trade, and public finance.

public goods (Rosenthal and Wong, 2012: 167-207). On the other hand, the European state-system constrained its political units to be constantly prepared for and to wage wars, therefore raising the tax burden on their citizens and rendering concessions to them almost inevitable. An ‘unintended consequence’ arose from this overall unfavourable context for economic growth. Economic activity had to move into fortified towns in order to avoid destruction from war. In this environment, investment in capital was more rewarding than in labour (due to the scarcity thereof), hence catalysing an economy oriented toward technological innovation and the adoption of machinery (Rosenthal and Wong, 2012: 99-128).

On the empirical level, Rosenthal and Wong raise more questions than they can answer. For example, although they recognise British exceptionality in its rural location of industry (compared to the typical European urban location of manufacturing), they offer no explanation for this, despite this coinciding with the locus of the Industrial Revolution. They maintain the argument of the continent’s fortified cities’ innovative spirit, despite locating the European technological leap in Britain (and thus its move to the countryside) in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Consequently, it is difficult to agree with them that the technologies associated with the Industrial Revolution (such as the spinning jenny and the steam engine) ‘were developed in ways that were very similar to the development of older, less economically-rewarding technologies’ (Rosenthal and Wong, 2012: 124). Their argument focusing more on the inventions themselves, than on their implementation and their relation to production and its social organisation, renders them unable to fit within their theoretical model their own empirical conclusions<sup>30</sup>, i.e. that the relation of techniques and technologies to the economy in Britain simply does not fit the Continental pattern, even before industrial capitalism.

Similarly, Rosenthal and Wong (2012: 126, 200) assert that geopolitical competition was not the exclusive privilege of Europe,<sup>31</sup> but they also admit that they cannot explain why

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<sup>30</sup> A further example of this is their affirmation that that the unique British success was a matter of demand for such improvements.

<sup>31</sup> They cite Africa, Mesoamerica, southern and central Europe, and Southeast Asia as similar areas witnessing



only there did it lead to an advantage in ‘capital-using technological change’. Given their causal chain establishing a direct relation between political fragmentation, warfare, urbanisation, and the likelihood of technological change, one would expect that the assumptions on which they base their core arguments would cohere with their own empirical data, and that they would suggest explanations for the non-recurrent character in world history of the causal links proposed.

### 3.3 Space, power and politics

It is paradoxical that Rosenthal and Wong’s thesis, which deliberately asks us to interrogate the relation between space and politics, promulgates such a simple conception of it, reminding us of the ‘Rise of the West’ narratives’ ‘state-system vs. empire’ dichotomy. Like Pomeranz (2000: 37), Rosenthal and Wong (2012: 4) take the size of the territory and population as a justification for the China/Europe comparison. When they discuss the relation between space and politics, which features as the crucial impetus of their divergent paths, they claim to be speaking literally about the spatial scale: their definition of empire is consciously minimalist, a ‘practical appellation for spatially large polities in contrast to far smaller ones’ (Rosenthal and Wong, 2012: 13)<sup>32</sup>. It becomes rapidly clear, however, that what they really mean by this is large spaces exempt from war. This one-dimensional logic pertaining to ‘space’ needs to be scrutinised. In the end, their explicit commitments to political geography, and to inquiring critically into the selection of units to compare is inconsistent and dissolves rapidly, because the former is not socially understood.

A comparison according to size and population presupposes that, like the Yangzi Delta within the Chinese empire, Britain was part of a whole called Europe. On a superficial level, this obviously does not hold, if only because British social relations were not affected by European politics in a manner similar to how the Yangzi Delta was affected by the

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political fragmentation. Rosenthal and Wong (2012: 126) leave it to ‘further researches’ to establish ‘just what kind of political competition is tolerable if one seeks to produce economic change’.

<sup>32</sup> Empires are ‘polities [...] where a central ruler exercised effective authority over a large fraction of a contiguous region’ (Rosenthal and Wong, 2012: 13). It is in this light, i.e. given that spatial scale is understood in its more restricted sense, that we can understand such sibylline affirmations as ‘much of what passes for international relations in Europe is domestic politics in China’ (Rosenthal and Wong, 2012: 4).

Chinese empire<sup>33</sup>. But Pomeranz and Wong have different implicit reasons for such comparisons. Pomeranz's strategy is to illustrate similar economic performance in core regions, first dissociating politics from economic performance and then trying to recover wider patterns and factors which might have influenced these regions. While I have previously criticised his use of data and conclusions, it is the incompleteness of his strategy with respect to what counts as social context, more than his method itself, which is questionable.<sup>34</sup> For Rosenthal and Wong, the China/Europe comparison is grounded in the assumption of similarity among European states (to the extent that we can see a single European ideal-type of state formation), due to an isomorphising international logic. Such non-problematisation of political geography is striking for an approach that criticised as Eurocentric the taking of pre-modern units as given according to their later nation-state form.

In *Before and Beyond the Great Divergence*, war in Europe is taken as a given derived simply from territorial fragmentation; it is a factual rather than a social phenomenon which imposes a particular logic on states. This logic of the anarchical system is the only way the 'international' enters into Rosenthal and Wong's narrative on state-building. In China, the absence of a state-system freed rulers from this logic. In the absence of such international dynamics, the meaning of territoriality in China is assumed as unproblematic; its disputed and unstable character, as well as its enmeshing in intra-elite relations, is ignored. This is why Wong can backdate arbitrarily the fixation of the territoriality both in Europe and in China by anachronistically already attributing to them the 'modern' consolidation of social relations. According to Rosenthal and Wong (2012: 10), 'as early as A.D. 1000', (socially unexplained) 'self-reinforcing patterns' were set for the diverging 'political equilibriums' (spatial fragmentation vs. spatial integration), and the difference in the spatial scale of

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<sup>33</sup> See for example Pomeranz's (2002b, 2008) recognition of this point on the difficulties of intra-European migrations and the Chinese state's support of certain property relations and socio-institutional arrangements.

<sup>34</sup> However, Pomeranz is particularly inconsistent in *The Great Divergence* about the weight of European internal diversity, switching between the *Annales*' emphasis on geo-climatic units (see the Preface to the French edition, 2010) and an opposition to the European character of the 'miracle', whichever serves best his argument of demonstrating parallels between both ends of Eurasia.

policies in Europe and China<sup>35</sup>. For scholars concerned with territory, Rosenthal and Wong (2012: 23) do not pay much attention to the varying size of this ‘long apprenticeship in the strategy of internal rule’, resulting from geopolitical challenges they under-estimated; they enquire even less into the manner in which these territories were ‘centrally’ administered; and they dismiss the social origins and impact of the expansion of the empire. Yet, territoriality was never settled as it was embedded in pre-modern dynamics of domination and exploitation; it was the relative capacity to enforce dynastic politics which delimited what was part of ‘China’ from what was not.

For Rosenthal and Wong, Chinese empire formation and European state formation seem to be only a rationalisation of governance on different scales. They dismiss the political constitution of territoriality and hinder themselves therefore from reaching their objective of explaining the geopolitical origins of breakthrough in Europe and their absence in China. To recall, the different international environments, conceived as defined only by the presence or absence of a war logic, yielded to two processes of state/empire formation. On the one hand, we have the traditional narrative of the isomorphising impact of being a part of a state-system, delineated primarily by the mere presence of multiple states with more or less equal power facing war-induced fiscal challenges and negotiating popular sovereignty for the financing of war (Wong, 1997: 127-151). On the other hand, Rosenthal and Wong produce a very benevolent and very static image of the Chinese empire. This involves the absence of political competition engulfing state revenues, which establishes the conditions of possibility for a ‘benevolent’ ruler, guided by Confucianism, to unite local and central, as well as elites’ and peasants’, interests in an ideal domestic order, characterised by low taxes and investment in infrastructure (especially through granaries; see Will and Wong, 1991).

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<sup>35</sup> In their historical discussion, they cannot but keep postponing the stabilisation of these forms of territoriality to 1279 (i.e. to the Mongol invasion of China) and then arbitrarily to 1500. The Mongol reign appears as a fundamental instance of the consolidation of the spatial scale of China, without consideration of its relation to the wider early Mongol empire or its later complex relation with other khanates. For them, the reunification of the North and the South under the Qing constitutes another instance of the stabilisation of the imagined frontiers of the empire – as they appear to contemporaries. This is already an improvement on Wong’s (1997: 76) previous assumption that ‘China never really experienced permanent fragmentation after its period of intense interstate competition ending in the third century B.C.E.’. I leave the historical contention with these affirmations to the empirical chapters.

As I shall demonstrate in the empirical part of the thesis, this perspective on the Chinese state relies on passive acceptance of the imperial ideology of Confucian collaboration and promotion of welfare and growth, presuppositions which do not hold against historical interrogation. There is more to the history of China than the succession of dynasties recapturing the idea of the Chinese empire and building on the work of previous rulers, as argued by the ‘dynastic cycles’ paradigm. The Sinocentric myth of China’s regional superiority throughout its history has been importantly challenged as well. The impact of consequent ‘international’ pressures also often led to the re-privatisation of political power, as in Europe. The office-system praised by Wong for its efficiency and integration of dominant classes was rather characterised by the politically-constituted access to peasants’ surpluses, whilst the ‘low tax consensus’ was circumvented by the consequent use of this system to raise additional fees and surcharges. Wong’s intra-elite peace based on the continuity of governance ignores the many changes in relations to property; in sources of social status and economic wealth, through and parallel to the state; in the status of the peasants; in elites’ relations to the state; and in the forms of the state. Another key problem in Rosenthal and Wong’s work is that it is highly misleading to assume that since China was an ‘empire’, there was no war and therefore no important military expenditures<sup>36</sup>. Furthermore, the re-mapping of East Asia was constant, as expansion meant the opening of new sources of income and the possibility to relax tensions with the elite.

Contrary to Wong’s thesis on the Chinese moral order, both land and people were coveted by diverse factions of the elite, and their access to these was politically-constituted and often militarily contested, never fixed and always depending on the local and ‘national’ balance of power between peasants, landlords, merchants, ruling houses, and their entourages. Rosenthal and Wong’s neutral view of the Chinese state derives from their alleged absence of pressures toward war waging. There are, however, strong empirical grounds for arguing that such pressures existed also in China, were equally enmeshed in the

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<sup>36</sup> For example, in one of Wong and Rosenthal’s starting points for China’s ‘spatial integration’, the Song period, 75% of the state revenues went to military expenditures (Mote, 1999: 115; Twitchett and Smith, 2009: 399).

personalisation of the state and the struggles to gain political access to revenue, and, consequently, that until very late in the ‘pre-modern’ period continental Europe resembled closely the traditional Chinese ‘despot’.

Rosenthal and Wong’s flattened history of an integrated and unchanging imperial rule has its roots in the under-problematisation and contradictory mobilisation of agency. On the one hand, the European trajectory is over-determined by geographical contingencies. In other words, the structural constraints fostered by the state-system led in themselves to modern economic growth. On the other hand, the Chinese path is explained by a highly voluntarist conception of agency. In minimising the social contradictions of the regime and in setting aside the traditional enquiry of HS into relations of domination and exploitation, Rosenthal and Wong are left with no means to explain China’s alleged preference in terms of fiscal policy, except by reference to the pursuit and refinement of the typically Chinese imperial form of rule that existed *ab initio*. The Chinese empire’s disintegration and reconstitution (always in accordance with the idea of the continuity of a Chinese empire) are analysed through the prism of the degree of fulfilment of the allegedly traditional tasks of the empire: maintaining the integrity of the territory whilst preserving a good tax/services ratio founded on the idea of Confucian good governance. Every step of this tautological study is ridden with anachronistic categories and agents evolving in a power vacuum.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the recent de-Europeanising of enquiry into the origins of the ‘Rise of the West’, the debates on the ‘Great Divergence’ still suffer from Eurocentrism. Wong’s method of reciprocal comparison has much to recommend it, but it cannot bear fruit so long as the California School faces the pitfalls of the ‘Rise of the West’ legacy. His objective of understanding core European transformations as historical processes to be compared, rather than constructed as abstract theoretical models, cannot be achieved whilst universalising the very results of these social changes, namely the economic/political and inside/outside differentiation. Wong indeed assumes as analytical transhistorical assumptions the logics these spheres acquired only through these processes of dissociation. These overlooked

Eurocentric pitfalls preclude enquiring into the social origins of modern economic growth and incorporating a social conception of political geography. This results, more generally, in the impossibility of identifying agency, because its workings are lost in the assumption that it follows the imperatives of anachronistically defined spheres (or sources of social power). Reciprocal comparison would be put to better anti-Eurocentric use in ruling out that Europe possessed intrinsic and pan-continental characteristics inevitably leading it towards modernity. The best way to do this is to denaturalise its exceptional features supposed to have set it on a special path, and to politicise the different trajectories of its constituent units, which in turn must contextualise the motivation of agents in order to specify our categories of analysis in showing what they meant socio-historically for the agents themselves.

The limitations of the ‘state-system vs. empire’ dichotomy, propagated by the ‘Rise of the West’ paradigm, thus remained unchallenged by their main detractor, the California School. It is however imperative to leave behind the fallacy of inscribing the ‘nation-state’ framework on pre-modern Europe. This eludes firstly the diversity of European units beside ones conforming to (incomplete) absolutist sovereignty, but also their ‘empire-like’ character. This ultimately reifies the East/West dichotomy. Contending with this dichotomised view on East Asian and European international environments is fundamental since the geopolitical vacuum in which the Chinese empire is deemed to have been is what is assumed to draw a line between modernising Europe and stagnating, or slowly growing, China. Problematising the pre-modern forms of territoriality, inside Europe as well as compared to China, is a crucial step for circumventing the retrospective ascription of modernising tendencies prior to their conditions of possibility. Long-term stories of the consolidation of fragmented sovereignty and of spatial integration as gradual processes - whether or not we ascribe a modernising virtue to the first - obscure their pre-modern similarities, through which their specificities have to be understood. Such narratives indeed present the imperfect and conflict-ridden centralisation and territorialisation - as space and state were sources of income - as more or less natural and un-contradictory processes. I argue that it is the balance of power and resolution of conflicts in highly contested processes of state-formation, all sharing a socio-spatial dimension, that reveals the

specificity of developmental trajectories more than the geopolitical environment *per se*. Challenging the myth of Chinese stagnation is not enough; this must be done simultaneously with a critical examination into the pan-European ‘success’ and the legacy it bears for analytical strategies.

I therefore advocate an alternative theoretical framework for envisaging, in a non-Eurocentric way, the history of Imperial China. To confront the Eurocentric analyses of its trajectory, we must however go beyond the timeframe set by the California School, a theoretical perspective that has been overly prevalent in the search for a way out of the ‘Rise of the West’ paradigm. China has been recently brought back within the discipline of IR beyond its use as a tool to further specify the European take-off. From Realism (Kang, 2010) to the English School (Zhang and Buzan, 2012), many scholars try to decipher Chinese allegedly unique international institutions, the roots of which are found in the Tang (618-907) and Song (969-1279) dynasties’ consolidation of the bureaucratic office-state and tribute-system. Such East Asian uniqueness in matters of hierarchy and hegemony was also a factor implicit in the explanation of the divergence of the Chinese ‘empire’ and the European ‘nation-states’ in the literature reviewed here. Investigating historically in specific socio-spatial configurations of Chinese and European polities up to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century will allow me to show the pre-modern continuum on which they rest, and to rule out as the origins of ‘rise’ and ‘non-rise’ such naturalised geopolitical or normative features. On a general level, this study is about understanding the conflicts around power that shaped the Chinese trajectory. ‘Rise’ and ‘non-rise’ alike are better conceived as the historical outcomes of such conflicts, and the socio-political contexts in which they occurred need to be understood through radically historicised categories that can recover the specificity of the phenomenology of power and socio-spatial practices. Prior to such an empirical demonstration for the case-study of Imperial China through a PM perspective, I shall first show that Eurocentrism is not congenial to Marxism, and further demonstrate that my historicist method circumvents the four facets of Eurocentrism I have highlighted above.

## Chapter Two – Eurocentrism and Marxism

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the spread of revolutions in the ‘Third World’ confronted Marxism with one of its most important conundrums. The issue of the universality of the theory was posed with a new, political, acuteness. New questions have been introduced, from thinking about the impact of revolutions occurring in peasant societies (e.g. Lenin, Trotsky, and Mao) to a growing recognition of the structural impact of the unequal relation between the West and the ‘rest of the world’ (e.g. anti-colonialist local Marxisms, WST, and Dependency Theory). The application of Marx’s work outside of his original area of historical investigation opens up a new series of problematiques also on the theoretical front. The categorisation of the non-Western world entails debates pertaining to the Eurocentric nature of Marxism: the linearity or non-linearity of development and its motor; the ontological dichotomy of East and West; and the theorisation of the ‘superstructural’ forms. Following further debates on the nature of pre-capitalist and non-Western societies and revisions of Marxist periodisation, does Marxism still fall prey to the understanding of world history through the prism of European modernity, and more specifically to the ‘Rise of the West’ Eurocentric legacy I identified? Must the ‘East’ be an imperfect form of the West; or, put simply, must the former follow the path of the latter, and if so, why? Asking whether the addition of a mode upsets the theoretical model, and whether historical development is universal, two-fold, or completely open, brings us back to the question of what drives history.

It is here, I shall argue, that we find the illustration of the core differences between Historical Materialisms (HM) trends, and the differences in their capacity to overcome Eurocentrism. What we encounter in the Marxist literature are multiple HM, reflecting differential readings of Marx and Marxism. Section One will examine the evolution of Marx’s thinking on historical development and the place of the non-West in it. This has important bearings for the accusation of ‘historicism’ often levelled against Marxism (Chakrabarty, 2000). Historicism here refers to a teleological and stadial theory of history.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> It is not to be confused with my later use of the term as referring to a perspective informed by social history.



I will show that Marx was however not always consistent in believing that the non-West recapitulates the previous historical stages of Europe. Marx's writings on the non-West indeed contain two contending theories of history and definitions of what constitutes a 'mode of production'.<sup>38</sup> The possibility of a non-Eurocentric Marxism necessitates emphasising his multi-linear conception of historical development.

Section Two will address how Marxist categories have been produced in subsequent theorisations of the AMP and the tributary mode. The second, correlated, problem deemed as congenital to Marxism by its anti-Eurocentric critiques is indeed its categorisation of the world in a way that does not fit the non-West (Saïd, 1978; Hobson, 2012: 52-58). I will argue that these mode-of-production analyses cannot overcome such Eurocentrism due to their formalism and adherence to Marx's problematic early theory of history, anchored in a Liberal narrative. Overall, I shall demonstrate that, in order to overcome Eurocentrism, the emphasis must be put on Marx's conceptualisation of class relations and class struggles, both as theory of history and as understanding of 'modes'. This chapter therefore also serves to establish the basis to distinguish my own approach's (PM) specificities within this tradition.

## 1. Marx' writings

Several Eurocentric passages from Marx, related to the 'unchangeableness' of Asia which 'has no history at all'<sup>39</sup>, have haunted any Marxist studying world history. Marx's perspective on the non-Western world nonetheless dramatically changed over the course of his works, including regarding political events<sup>40</sup>. The discovery and translation of

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<sup>38</sup> I shall use here the widely employed term 'mode of production', although I will depart from this concept in my own analysis.

<sup>39</sup> This comes from an article in the *New York Daily Tribune* of 1853: 'India has no history in general [...]: what we call the history of that country is external history, the succession of foreign conquerors who set up their kingdoms on the passive foundation of their societies, who offered no resistance to them, and underwent no change.'

<sup>40</sup> Marx's articles on India and China celebrate the 'progressive' impact of British imperialism on such a 'backward' societies characterised by 'Oriental despotism'. This parallels Marx's perspective in the *Communist Manifesto*. These societies' agency and resistance to British rule was underlined in later works. See Ahmad (1994: 221-242), Anderson (2010), Brook (1989:11), Jani (2002), and Young (2001: 101-112) on this growing anti-colonialist stance. Others study the complex relation of Marx's works to Asia (Bartolovich and Lazarus, 2002; Lindner, 2010).

previously unpublished manuscripts<sup>41</sup> has moreover recently upset the notion that Marx was a thoroughgoing Eurocentrist. I will argue that the evolution of Marx's view on the AMP parallels the increasing sophistication of his theory of history.

Some words have to be said about the state of knowledge in Marx's time and the general objective of his study of non-Western societies. Despite that 'the theory of the Asiatic mode of production makes excessive demands on the sources' (Kradner, 1975: 304), Marx's historical knowledge on the 'Orient' was tenuous (Anderson, 1974b; Hobsbawm, 1964: 20-26), in the absence of an archaeology of ancient societies, which would later revolutionise anthropology and the study of primitive societies (Godelier, 1978b: 106-142). Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that Marx's prime goal in mobilising this knowledge on non-Western societies was to reveal the specificity of capitalism against alternative social organisations, rather than to understand those social systems as such.

### 1.1 The concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production

The concept of the AMP appears for the first time in the *Grundrisse* (written in 1857-1858) and in the *Preface to a Critique of Political Economy* in 1859. This can already be viewed as a progressive move, from the term 'Oriental society' (a remnant of the Enlightenment's contempt for Asia) to the study of the East through the same analytical tools as are used for understanding historical change in the West (Kradner, 1975). This mode was originally intended to show an original, more or less 'natural', stage from which Western societies evolved, a stage based on Marx's contemporary India, which had remained, according to him, relatively unchanged since that time. In this sense, Marx was still a product of his era in preserving the idea that Asia was 'closer to the origin of human society than European societies were' (Brook, 1989: 7). To a certain extent, India was not only the 'cradle' but also the 'museum' of primitive forms of social organisation (Godelier, 1978a: 65 – my translation). This is so because the 'despotic' state grafts itself onto the independent communities previously established, without altering their self-sustaining character and the

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<sup>41</sup> Kradner (1972) first translated and published 'Marx's Ethnological Notebooks'. Thereafter, the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* project revealed unpublished works, notebooks, and letters, among other texts dealing with non-Western societies (see Anderson, 2010).

unity of agriculture and manufacture that prevailed within those villages.

However, moving towards his more thorough analysis of the AMP in the *Formen* (a section of the *Grundrisse*), Marx seems to have abandoned the geo-determinist insistence of his early writings<sup>42</sup> on the ‘despotic’ character of the state, arising out of the necessity of public works due to the aridity of the climate and thereby implying the monopolisation of the land by the sovereign. Indeed, after readings which covered a larger range of non-Western societies,<sup>43</sup> Marx defines the AMP mainly through the notion of self-sufficient villages embodying a collective labour process, and he acknowledges a variety of state forms (from despotic to democratic, from centralised to decentralised) that can arise from such communal forms of property. History is brought back to India in Marx’s *Ethnological Notebooks*, alongside the recognition of social antagonisms in examples of the AMP (Anderson, 2010: 209-210). Asia – or the non-Western world – is less and less viewed as a monolithic, unchanging, and pre-conceived bloc.

### 1.2 Conflicting theories of world history

Marx’s work on the AMP reveals an important issue: the question of the categorisation of Asia is one about its place in historical development, and thus about the nature of the latter. The evolution within Marx’s conception of Asia parallels the evolution of his theory of world history from the *German Ideology* and the *Manifesto* to the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. In the former, Marx’s thought is still embedded in the evolutionist perspective of his era by making stages in the social division of labour correspond to forms of property. Such a succession of modes of production driven by a transhistorical, techno-determinist law or the growing of capitalism ‘in the interstices’ of feudalism is reminiscent of the commercial model of classical political economy (Brenner, 1989; Hobsbawn, 1964; Wood, 2002). This culmination of progress furthermore follows a geographical itinerary (as the parallels between Hegel’s and the ‘young’ Marx’s conceptions of historical development exemplify),

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<sup>42</sup> Marx took the idea of the absence of private property in land, a fashionable notion in his time, from François Bernier, and thereafter linked it, on Engels’ suggestion, with geographical determinants. See Anderson (1974b) for a genealogy of thinkers who influenced Marx in the creation of the AMP concept.

<sup>43</sup> The *Ethnological Notebooks* shows Marx’s critique of many anthropological writings of his era. In Marx’s later writings, parts of the AMP conceptual apparatus are applied to India, Java, and China, pre-Columbian America, Russia, and Spain.

from Asia (either by its absence or by its association with primitive societies) to the Ancient World and then to Northern Europe (Brooks, 1989: 5-6; Thorner, 1969: 341-342).

However, this conception is nuanced in Marx's later works, in which we find an innovative thesis on historical development. Already in the *Formen*, Marx's concerns with a universal rule, 'some external historical necessity', switched to an awareness of the specificities of different modes governing the behaviours of agents (Wood, 2008b: 88). In these later works, Marx shows how abstract and general categories (such as labour, property, or surplus extraction) appear historically, thus providing the internal principles guiding human activity in particular modes, rather than seeing these categories as evolving forms marking the 'forward march of the bourgeoisie'. He is therefore interested in breaks in the allegedly progressive evolution of these forms through history, the 'Asiatic', 'Ancient', and 'German' modes having much more in common among themselves than does any of the Western ones, including feudalism, with capitalism. No criteria such as the levels of division of labour or productive forces can stand either as an explanation of the transition or as a gradation of modes. For Marx, all three modes (Ancient, Germanic, and Asiatic) are now alternatives roads out of primitive society, i.e. belonging to the 'same stage of development' rather than having to abide to a formal pre-conceived sequential perspective (Hobsbawm, 1964). Communal property no longer embodies a homogenous stage; it had undergone different forms, within Asia and within Europe, and different modes arose from them (Anderson, 2010: 160-162). This growing alternative conception of historical development allows for its theorisation as multilinear, in which the non-Western world is no longer necessarily trapped at the remote end of a universal evolutionary list.

Other materials illustrate Marx's later opposition to a reading of his work as a universalising history of mankind. In 1877, Marx wrote that his analysis must not be read as 'a historico-philosophic theory of the general path that every people is fated to tread, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves placed' (in Shanin, 1983: 136). This emphasises the historically specific character of his account of the transition between modes. As additionally shown through Marx's editing changes to the

French edition of *Capital* (Anderson, 2010: 176-180; Wada, 1983)<sup>44</sup>, he does not see the European trajectory as the one that was logically determined to happen, but one based on his contingent historical conclusions. Marx adopted through this a multilinear perspective<sup>45</sup>. The simplistic diffusionism and teleology of the *Manifesto* has softened.

## 2. Conceptualising the ‘non-West’ in Marxist debates

Vigorous debates among Marxists have arisen out of this quote: ‘In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society’ (Marx, 1979). This section discusses different Marxist categorisations of the non-West, from the politicised debates around the AMP to the more recent thesis on the tributary mode. I will demonstrate that the different extents to which they each abide by Marx’s early theory of history impede their objective to overcome Eurocentrism. Their correlated neglect of social conflict and ‘superstructure’ offers contrast with these PM strengths, to be demonstrated, in the next chapter, as enabling its anti-Eurocentric understanding of non-Western history.

### 2.1 The debate around the Asiatic mode

The intellectual history of the AMP in the regions allegedly encompassed by this model is linked with their political history and the history of the Internationals in complex ways which can only be browsed over here. In a nutshell, the AMP debates were formally put aside in the USSR<sup>46</sup> with Stalin’s official proclamation in 1938 of the five-step model of his *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*. The traditional model sticks to the universal history in five steps (primitive society/ancient society/feudalism/bourgeois society/socialism)

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<sup>44</sup> Anderson (2010: 171-176) explains how Marx intended this version to be the one on which other editions should have been based.

<sup>45</sup> Marx’s late writings on Russia moreover suggest the possibility of skipping stages of development: ‘Precisely because it is contemporaneous with capitalist production, the rural commune may appropriate all its positive achievements without undergoing its frightful vicissitudes’ (draft of a reply to Vera Zassoulitch in Shanin, 1983: 102). Trotsky took up this challenge of the multilinearity of development set out by Marx. I shall return, in the next chapter, to the vast literature on UCD arising out of Trotsky’s insights. It should already be noted that there are major differences between Marx’s ‘negative’ multilinearity, revolving around the possibility of different paths of development, and Trotsky’s ‘positive’ multilinearity implying the interactivity of paths of development.

<sup>46</sup> The concept of the AMP was previously disregarded by Lenin, but for very different reasons from Stalin’s strategic ones, i.e. mainly because it denies the existence of social classes and their effect in non-Western countries (Bloch, 1983: 108-113).

presented by Marx in his early works. This ‘single ladder’ model generally has as its corollary a search for ‘fundamental laws’ at each stage which would explain mechanically the passage from one stage to the next (Hobsbawm, 1964: 60-61). The Comintern stated that the communists in the ‘Third World’ were to ally themselves with their national bourgeoisie, emulating the Western strategy of the ‘bourgeois revolution’. Opposition to Stalin’s dictum in China and the USSR took mainly two forms. Some scholars concluded that China differed only ‘in the rate, not in the nature’ of development, and that China followed Marx’s universal model, albeit in Oriental variants of Ancient and feudal societies.<sup>47</sup> Others proposed a bilinear model, as an alternative path in which the AMP have arisen out of the primitive society in China and Russia, explaining their despotisms or stagnation (Melotti, 1977; Wittfogel, 1957; Wu, 1989)<sup>48</sup>.

From the sixties onwards, the *Centre d’études et de recherches marxistes*<sup>49</sup> rekindled along multilinear lines the debate on the AMP in Soviet anthropology (Bloch, 1983: 116-123; Sawyer, 1977: 333-372). Godelier (1978b) refuted the ‘Asiatic’ setting of the AMP and its association with despotism, locating it instead on a ‘developmental’ scale as a transitional, but dynamic, mode between classless and class societies. Circumventing unilinearity, the AMP is now seen as giving way either to the slave mode (in the West) or to differentiated forms of feudalism.

Even in Godelier’s more sophisticated model, the non-Western world is ultimately confined to limbo, in a transitional form problematically ‘lasting for one or two millennia’ (Le Than Koi, 1981: 288) which ‘end[s] with the same *reductio ad absurdum* produced by an

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<sup>47</sup> Being written in ignorance of Marx’s later works - the *Grundrisse* became available in China only in 1963 (Zhang, 2008) -, those works thus extended the category of feudalism, providing for an alternative, albeit still unilinear, model (Hobsbawm, 1964: 61-63). See Dirlik (1978, 1985) on Chinese interpretations of feudalism. For a similar inflation of this category, applied to India, see Mukhia (1981, 2008). This confuses a small period of European world history with a criterion by which all pre-capitalist world history should be evaluated. The slave-owning society as alternative to the Ancient society was promoted by Struve in the USSR in 1933.

<sup>48</sup> Magyar and Plekhanov figure as the early *Aziatchiki* (Soviet proponents of the AMP). See also McFarlane *et al.* (2005) for an overview of the national debates. For a translation of important Chinese works on the AMP, see Brook (1989).

<sup>49</sup> Alongside Godelier, Jean Suret-Canale (working on Africa), Alfred Métraux (working on the pre-Incan states) and Jean Chesneaux are prominent figures of this school. From the thirties onwards, Japanese thinkers already foresaw many of their conclusions (Fogel, 1988).

indefinite extension of feudalism' (Anderson, 1974b: 487). The extent to which the AMP 's stagnation or 'half-classless' character draws on Marx's early theory of history is overlooked in the literature. This is demonstrated by what the AMP precludes: the emergence of a money economy, of commodity relations, of an open labour market, and of an urban bourgeoisie. This results from the self-sustaining character of the community that unites manufacture and agriculture, '[containing] all the conditions for reproduction and surplus production within itself' (Marx, 1964, quoted in Hobsbawm: 33). All these features, rather than social conflicts, are what is supposed to drive historical change in Marx's early theory of history.

Yet, stagnation, or 'non-development', fusion of manufacture and agriculture, and the individual's ability to ensure its own subsistence or to appropriate surplus through organisation in communities in order to preserve current conditions, are the characteristics of all pre-capitalist societies (Anderson, 1974b: 489; Brenner, 1977). However, non-development does not mean the absence of social antagonisms and social conflicts: there is always a 'political moment', i.e. a contested character, to any 'stagnant' mode insofar as it is understood as an institutional arrangement of exploitative social relations, and not as instances of an otherwise determined transhistorical mechanism.<sup>50</sup>

## 2.2 The thesis of the tributary mode

This Marxist tradition conceptualises the variegated sub-modes of both Western and non-Western worlds under the broader notion of the tributary mode, to be distinguished from kin-ordered/primitive and capitalist societies. I will first critically review the main initial propositions made by Samir Amin, Chris Wickham, and John Haldon, before turning to Jairus Banaji's more recent attempt.

Amin, Wickham, and Haldon propose Althusserian analyses of any social formation

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<sup>50</sup> The definition of a mode as the relationship between the productive forces and the relations of production – the contradiction between them furthering social development – pertains to Marx's early theory of history. This is to be opposed to his statement in *Capital* to the effect that 'The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, [...] the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers, [...] reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure' (Marx, 1998: 777-778).

classically understood as a ‘concrete combination of different modes of production, organised under the *dominance* of one of them’ (Anderson, 1974a: 22). Extending the unequal development thesis to pre-capitalist formations, Amin (1976, 2010) differentiates, by the strength of the superstructure, between European weak/peripheral (decentralised) societies and Chinese, Indian and Egyptian strong/central (centralised) social formations. In contrast, Wickham seeks ‘to exclude political and legal definitions’ of modes (1985: 90) and thus locates the differences between the modes in their ‘economy’, i.e. between tax- or rent-based exploitation. For him, the fundamental difference between these two types is the locus of class struggle: over the amount of product peasants must give to the exploiting class (for the tributary mode), or over the control of the production process (for the feudal variant). Haldon (1993) also dismisses superstructures in his definition of ‘modes of surplus appropriation’, but disagrees with Wickham by arguing that rent-takers and tax-collectors are ‘two factions of a single ruling class’.<sup>51</sup> For Haldon, it is the political relationship and the contention within groups of the ruling class over the surplus distribution which differentiates tributary societies from one another and propels the change from one mode to another. For all these authors, these two modes are more or less well articulated historically in given social formations, and this is what gives rise to contradictions.

The problem with such Althusserian analyses is their difficulty in making their theoretical position fit with their historical enquiries<sup>52</sup>. They seek to infer analytically contradictions between these modes, whereas they are forced to recognise, in their empirical studies, that such ‘contradictions’ arise rather between classes, thereby undermining the explanatory force of their model. Despite their different positions on superstructures, these authors all fail to reconcile their analysis of superstructural forms to their theories of social changes. They rely heavily on the Althusserian notion of articulation of modes of production, which inclines them to privilege productive forces above relations of production as the level of explanation, contrary to what they claim. They thus partake in Marx’s problematic theory of history criticised above.

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<sup>51</sup> This view fits more closely with Wolf’s (1997:81) definition of variants within the tributary mode as ‘variable outcomes of the competition between classes of non-producers for power at the top’.

<sup>52</sup> This argument will be further developed in Chapter Three.



In his attempt to build an anti-Eurocentric, anti-teleological, and anti-formalist Marxism, Banaji revises the conceptual apparatus in terms of modes of production as more than the mere form of exploitation they imply. He is interested in ‘historical capitalisms’, as varied configurations of the logic of accumulation of capital (for example, in commercial, money-lending, or slave-holding capitalisms), thereby favouring the reading of Marx’s comprehension of the cumulative rise of capitalism (Banaji, 2010: 4). He however adds more exotic locations to instances of sprouts of capitalist-oriented merchants, amongst others Song China (960-1279) through its capitalist industries adjusted to international markets (Banaji, 2010: 28-30). China, notably during the Song dynasty, is however also viewed as belonging to the tributary mode (Banaji, 2010: 27-33)<sup>53</sup>. Such a mode is characterised by the tributary state control of the means of production, the ruling class, and peasant labour.

As for the previous proponents of this mode, when Banaji tests empirically his hypotheses across Eurasia, he allows for a whole spectrum of state/elite relationships and variations in forms of domination of the peasantry in terms of place and time, through the notion of ‘historical configurations’. The Chinese state certainly did not ‘own’ the elites throughout its history (even Banaji recognises such fluctuations); forms of domination varied, especially when we add the variable of peasants’ struggles and differentiated statuses through history. Intra-elite relations are best seen as an arena to investigate in order to understand how power is negotiated, rather than as a prerogative of a mode (since these are ‘contingent’ variables, outside of the ‘essential form’, in the concurrent feudal mode (Banaji, 2010: 91). This is part of a wider problem of such analyses in terms of mode: political geography and authority relations are not critically integrated as social forms which are decisive dimensions of the struggle for power, institutionalising the ways to gain access to means of production and to products.

The formalist framework of modes-of-production analyses thus leads to a problematic

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<sup>53</sup> Song China also belongs to the feudal mode (Banaji, 2010: 85-86).

understanding of agency and superstructures. Marx's very materialism (as opposed to idealism) relies on a refusal to think of 'superstructures' as inhabiting a realm independent of the production and reproduction of material life; their 'causal' properties arise from their being understood as aspects of productive activity (Sayer, 1987: 88-89). Any dimension can 'function as relations of production', i.e. possess the roles of 'determining access to and control over means of production and social product [...] and organizing the process of production as well as the process of distribution of products' (Godelier, 1986: 28). Thus, one must not assume theoretically which 'instances' or 'institutions' belong to the infrastructure, but uncover it historically; there cannot be any transhistorical or universal aspect that determines *a priori* the social character 'the material' adopts. Rather than being derived from a model, the particular 'contradictions' have to be specified for each regime at a level of concretisation that implies a disclosure of how social agents play and contest rules not easily grasped at the level of 'economy': the explanatory level of 'economic' changes has to be located in the political struggles.

## Conclusion

Contrarily to what is often assumed, several Marxist trends took the issue of Eurocentrism seriously and proposed a panoply of theories to overcome it in their revisiting of Marx's periodisation and categorisation. I have however shown the limits of the modes-of-production analyses due to their reliance on problematic versions of Marx's thought. During the debate on the transition to capitalism, Brenner (1989) demonstrated that there is more than one theory of history in Marx's work. I have further developed this point concerning different theories of world history in Marx's writings, illustrating the uneven presence of a 'waiting room of history' for the non-European world (Chakrabarty, 2000: 8). In the tradition of PM, Wood made her own the project of countering the naturalisation of capitalism in the traditional narratives of its emergence. However, it is not only capitalism which is essentialised in these studies, but also the West and its trajectory, and thus they contain many assumptions on what historical development on a world scale is, and who can be part of it.

In contrast to modes-of-production analyses, PM's emphasis on 'superstructure', historicity,

specificity, and the role of social struggles leads to the conclusion that the emergence of capitalism is not a logical (and thus universal) outcome of either the 'West' or of one of its exclusive modes of production. It was instead a historical outcome of class struggles that occurred in one of the atypical forms of Western feudalism. From this standpoint, this chapter has criticised the Eurocentric formalism and teleologism of some Marxist conceptions. Althusserianism further petrified the vocabulary of 'modes' by its ambiguous relation between theory and history (the so-called 'social formations'). PM's alternative understanding of regimes of social appropriation, based on a distrust of the teleological prefiguration of a given social form in a preceding one, overcomes such discrepancies. Whilst further exploring PM's distinction within the Marxist tradition, the next chapter builds on this critique in arguing for a wider critical use of generic concepts, including many on which the IR discipline has been built. PM's historicisation of praxes is meant to avoid reification of non-Western experiences and Eurocentric conceptual anachronisms.

### Chapter Three – Political Marxism

In the background of two central debates in IR and in social thought, the relations between history and theory and between agency and structure, this chapter highlights the originality of PM within the wider HS tradition. Clarifying how PM can overcome the charge of Eurocentrism and be applied to the analysis of a key non-Western case, China, is demonstrated in five steps. In continuity with the preceding chapter, and further substantiating the claim that the criticisms of Eurocentrism cannot be addressed to a homogeneous Marxism, Section One develops on the first generation of PM scholars' works on Marx's theories of history. This shows how Brenner and Wood discarded Marx's early stadial, techno-determinist, and teleological Smithian narrative of the emergence of capitalism in favour of a re-reading of social change through historically specific open-ended social conflicts.

In Section Two, the developing of such historicist method<sup>54</sup>, contrasting with *Capital's* logicist perspective, is set in the light of the debate within British Marxism occurring from the sixties onwards. The debate opposed a structuralist strand, illustrated by Perry Anderson's importation of Althusserianism, to a historicist strand, put forward by E. P. Thompson's reliance on the British tradition of social history. Section Three evaluates to which extent each of these influences are at work in PM. I will demonstrate that there are tensions between, on the one hand, Brenner's structuralist understanding of rationality, partially informed by Rational Choice Marxism (RCM) and illustrated in the 'rules' of reproduction generated by social-property relations, and, on the other hand, his historicist account of the transition to capitalism, stressing the agential, contested, and open-ended nature of historical outcomes. A similar tension is visible in Wood's work, between her Thompsonian approach to class and history and her structural, reifying reliance on imperatives rendering difficult to agentially understand historical specificity.

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<sup>54</sup> Historicism refers here to the historical grounding of analytical categories. On the misinterpretation of historicism by Althusser (1970) and for an overview of what historicism means to social historians, see Thompson (1978). The alternative meaning of historicism is discussed in Chapter Two.

Section Four reveals how a second generation of PM scholars (Samuel Knafo, Hannes Lacher, and Benno Teschke) has developed the historicist legacy of PM whilst responding to the need of a proper articulation of Marxism vis-à-vis IR (Halliday, 1994; Rosenberg, 2006; Skocpol, 1979; Teschke, 2005). This has been done through further re-conceptualisation of the relations between history and theory and between agency and structure, epitomised in the engagement with the UCD approach. The key claim is that PM's contribution to IR is to provide a method through which understanding the historically contested construction of political geographies and strategies of spatialisation, in opposition to a formalised and universal theory of 'the international'. Section Five engages with the charge of Eurocentrism as addressed more specifically to PM, and counter-argues that its anti-formalism enables the productive transfer of PM's method to the analysis of non-Western trajectories. Its historicist method overcomes the super-imposition of preconceived categories of analysis to the non-Western world, whilst providing means for understanding their socio-political conflicts on their own terms.

The chapter's conclusion thus stresses the necessity of strategies of concrete historicisation of generic concepts as praxes in order to reconstruct China's trajectory in its geopolitical context. 'Western' IR concepts, such as war, international, and hierarchy/anarchy, and sociology and political theory's concepts, such as state, empire, territory, economy, and rationality, must be radically historicised and specified on a case-by-case basis in order to recover the *sui generis* and contested character of their socio-political construction. This is what informs the historical reconstruction of China's trajectory from Chapter Four to Seven.

### **1. Political Marxism's theory of history**

The term 'Political Marxist' was coined by Guy Bois (1978) during the 'Brenner Debate' to criticise the 'voluntaristic' tendency in the works of Brenner on the transition to capitalism<sup>55</sup>. Through this debate, PM stimulates the renewal of anti-teleological, anti-determinist, and anti-functionalist Marxism. PM's historical method seeks to overcome the

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<sup>55</sup> This label is endorsed by Wood (1981) and her followers, who welcome the emphasis on the explanatory power of political struggles.

traditional labelling of Marxism as privileging theory over history and reproducing the base-superstructure model. The core concept of the approach, social property relations, is defined as:

the relationships among the direct producers, among the members of the class of exploiters (if any exists), and between the exploiters and producers, which specify and determine the access of individual economic actors (or families) to the means of production and to the economic product (Brenner, 1986: 26).

This concept includes, as constitutive of a 'mode of production' and at the level of the reproduction of material life, many 'extra-economic' dimensions, such as culture, religion, law, ideology and politics, i.e. social factors and institutional mediation. In studying the contestations of these social relations institutionalising inequality, PM places an explanatory emphasis upon the outcomes of concrete social struggles even at the risk of upsetting a theoretical model, in opposition to the assertion of universal laws to which empirical cases are bound to conform.

In this way, Brenner (1989) and Wood (1995) stress that two theories of history can be derived from Marx's work. As stated in Chapter Two, Marx's earlier works understand capitalism as the apogee of the development of productive forces taking place through an increasing division of labour<sup>56</sup>. This idea ultimately led to the theses of the 'bourgeois revolution', the 'commercial model', and the successive historical stages. A starkly different theory of transition is at work in the later texts, in which Marx recognises that the drive to revolutionise the forces of production is characteristic of capitalism, and of capitalism only. The sources of social transformation are then to be found in the distinctive dynamics of the mode of production from which class conflicts arise, as can be better seen in *Capital*, in the *Grundrisse*, and in his later historical writings. This less unilinear and teleological perspective was however never fully achieved, as *Capital* is not a history of capitalism conceived of as a social relation, but a history of capital whose effects produce capitalism (Thompson, 1978: 74-94). This fundamental tension within Marx's work forms

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<sup>56</sup> This can be set in the sociohistorical context of the salience of the ideas of the Enlightenment, in which capitalism is seen as coeval with ongoing historical progress in a teleological fashion (Wood, 1995: 146-149). The 'social history of political theory', developed by Wood in collaboration with Neal Wood (1978; Wood and Wood, 1977), has been tentatively applied to 'Marx's context' in Comninel (2000b).

the theoretical anchor of the divergence of structuralist, functionalist, rationalist, and historicist trends within Marxism.

## 2. The debate within British Marxism

The debate within British Marxism opposed two different schools of thought: what have been called the ‘British Marxist Historians’, foremost Thompson,<sup>57</sup> and the structuralists, deriving from Anderson’s introduction of Althusserianism into Britain.<sup>58</sup> Both interventions were designed to re-conceptualise the relations between the ‘base’ and the ‘superstructure’ and between history and theory, as well as the role of agency, but in highly distinct ways.

Louis Althusser’s prime objective is to elevate Marxism to the status of science, involving, as a ‘preliminary task’, epistemological critical readings of Marx, inspired by Western Marxism<sup>59</sup> (Anderson, 1976: 52). Briefly, Althusserian structuralism aims to relieve Marxism of its economism by epistemologically separating the social world, conceived as a ‘totality’, into three realms: ‘ideology’; the ‘economic’ (determinant in the ‘last instance’); and the ‘political’ (which is given a ‘relative autonomy’). In these theoretically determined structures (since ‘history’ can never be properly grasped), the subjects are ‘träger of structures’ and history is presented as a ‘process without subject’. Albeit combining Althusserianism with the British tradition of social history, Anderson’s HS (1974a, 1974b, 1976) has structuralist influences in the conceptualisation of pre-capitalist modes of production as distinguished by their superstructures (as a somehow distinct realm), the ‘articulation’ vocabulary of his theory of transition<sup>60</sup>, and the more classic ‘history from above’ required by his emphasis on a theory of the state.

Thompson’s historicism strongly departs from this kind of structuralism. Against

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<sup>57</sup> Kaye (1984) unites under this label also Maurice Dobb, Rodney Hilton, Christopher Hill, and Eric Hobsbawm, for their common ‘bottom up’ enquiries into the emergence and development of capitalism through a ‘class-struggle analysis’.

<sup>58</sup> See for example Hirst and Hindness (1975).

<sup>59</sup> Under this term, Anderson brings together, among others, Georg Lukàcs, Antonio Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Althusser.

<sup>60</sup> It is notably informed by an Analytical Marxist that I will mention in the next section: Gerald Cohen (1978).

misinterpretations of its theory as voluntarist (Anderson, 1980), a rehabilitation of the ‘materialist’ Thompson has been defended (Trimberger, 1984; Wood, 1995; Kaye, 1984). Thompson objects to the ‘self-generating conceptual universe’ of Althusserianism (1978: 17) and emphasises instead the importance of the empirical mode of investigation. Thompson stresses the historical experience of social groups over theoretically inferred, fixed, and de-historicised ‘categories of stasis’, of which history is but a manifestation. He constructed his relational definition of class by a historical logic (building the Marxist categories out of regularities observed over time). A class is therefore not a location within a structure, but a common experience—as a mediation between ‘social being’ and ‘social consciousness’ translated onto cultural grounds—of divergent interests from another social group. The concept of ‘experience’ illustrates that individuals are simultaneously ‘part-objects’ (of society ‘organised in class ways’) and ‘part-subjects’ (proper agents shaping history). This contrasts with Althusserianism’s irresolvable dualism between the deterministic realm of structure and the contingent historical plane (Wood, 1995: 59). This concept is particularly important in Thompson’s corollary emphasis on struggle because the impact of the division of society into classes—felt at the ‘level’ of social relations, institutions, customs, values, and daily life as a common experience—is the source of the generation of antagonisms and conflicts and, ultimately, social change.

### **3. Tensions with Political Marxism**

Where does PM fit in this Marxist philosophical divide? Despite its Thompsonian heritage, PM works sometimes exhibit a strictly defined conception of agency (Brenner, 1986, 1997) and a formalistically conceived structure (Wood, 2002, 2003). PM’s tensions in this regard will be revealed through RCM’s influence on Brenner, before turning, in the next section, to the historicist response of the second generation.

Originating in neoclassical economics, Rational Choice Theory has been extended to Marxism through RCM (Elster, 1985; Roemer, 1982), as a special branch of Analytical Marxism.<sup>61</sup> The central characteristic of RCM is its unravelling of the conscious, strategic,

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<sup>61</sup> Analytical Marxism also encompasses functionalism (Cohen, 1978). These approaches diverge notably on



intentional and rational ways agents act in given social relations, an enterprise necessitating a micro level of analysis and only critically incorporating methodological individualism (Wright, 1995). Many critiques have been aimed at RCM: agents are no more than ‘embodied structures’, their motivation automatically being derived from them; its non-relational concepts of class and exploitation render the model unable to explain the background distribution; the model is based on a generalisation of capitalist rationality/transition/‘freedom’, assuming what needs to be explained; it is compatible with no theory of history (Chibber, 2011; Goldfield and Gilbert, 1995; Wood, 1989; Wright, 1995).

In some of Brenner’s works, there is a RCM tendency to derive ‘strategic’, ‘maximising’ behaviours not from historical analyses, but analytically, from the constraints imposed by social-property relations, thereby confining the possible behaviours along strict lines<sup>62</sup>. A structuralist tendency is present also in some of Wood’s ‘ideal-type of capitalist rationality’, which totalises all social reality under its deployment (Knafo, 2007: 102).<sup>63</sup> Her sometimes rigid reading of the separation of the economic and the political in capitalism could lead to a return to a simple theoretical derivation of capitalism from the logic of capital.<sup>64</sup>

Yet, Brenner’s works differs from RCM in its relational definition of class and exploitation, leading to a thicker, more socialised and historicised conception of rationality (Wood, 1989,

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the adequacy of a ‘methodological collectivism’ and on the primacy of either functional or intentional and causal explanations.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Brenner’s four ideal types of combination of collective or individual organisation of property and surplus-extraction in pre-capitalist societies. Brenner (1986: 51-53) inferred theoretically the likeness of the intentional and unintentional outcomes of these ideal-types to lead to the dispossession of peasants of their means of subsistence. The explanatory power is not put on varying and contested strategies actually implemented, and conceptualised as ‘historically open’ (Teschke and Lacher, 2007: 571), but on structures more or less favourable to the transition to capitalism. This even allowed Carling’s (1991), a RCM scholar, combining of Brenner’s ‘special theory’ (as an ideal-type of interactions among intentional actors within a mode of production) with the ‘general’ (functionalist) theory of Cohen.

<sup>63</sup> For example, Wood’s thesis on capitalist imperialism (as the culmination of capitalist inner logic) or her anthropomorphising affirmation that capitalism ‘needs’ a multiple-state system and a hegemon. See also Chibber (2005) and Allison and Anievas (2010).

<sup>64</sup> ‘For the separation-argument is not conceived as an absolute, once-and-for-all insulation of spheres, but as an internal relation between states and markets whose degrees of de-politicization and re-politicization depend on historically concrete praxes’ (Teschke, 2011: 89).

1990).<sup>65</sup> Even in *Analytical Marxism*, Brenner (1986) maintains an important emphasis on class struggle and political organisation, institutions, and communities, and challenges the transhistorical rationality of Rational Choice Theory by grounding sociohistorically what he had identified earlier as ‘Smithian economic rationality’ (1977). *Merchants and Revolution* is a masterpiece in terms of theorisation of a social process, in which social relations, cultural forms, class strategies, interests and alliances, and state forms and policies are conceptualised as conflictual and always contested, and whose outcome is historically open. Crucially, these social forms are not to be deduced analytically, but to be recovered historically in a Thompsonian ‘logic of process’, as emphasised by Wood (1982).

#### **4. Political Marxism’s renewal: agency and geopolitics**

The Thompsonian legacy in PM was later re-activated. Knafo (2010) argues for a stronger PM’s conceptualisation of agency, as a methodological principle instead of as an ontological issue.<sup>66</sup> This entails that we cannot predict how agents would react to ‘imperatives’ upon their sole description, e.g. before historical research revealing the multiple variables that ‘conditioned’ agency.<sup>67</sup> Social regimes of appropriation primarily gives form to ‘regularities, shaping and directive pressures, indicative articulations of human practices’ (Thompson, 1978: 116), rather than being explanatory in themselves of the agents’ behaviours and of social change. Preferring ‘ways’ over ‘rules’ of reproduction (Teschke and Lacher, 2007) and ‘appropriation’ over ‘property’ (Dufour and Rioux, 2008: 129) emphasises that there is no one-way straight line between social-property relations (‘structure’) and agency, the latter then sometimes, intentionally or not, giving way to a different set of limitations.

Yet, PM’s theory of history does not dissolve into an un-theorisable, empirical series of contingent events. It is the manner in which the ‘structure’ is mobilised by agents that

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<sup>65</sup> Teschke’s (2003) ‘bounded rationality’ would also fall into this category. Such a historicised rationality strengthens the ‘classic’ rationality by putting the preferences and the ends in social context (Teschke, 1998: 340-341).

<sup>66</sup> This does not lead to a ‘voluntaristic’ theory of history, which would imply that agency matters historically by virtue of its (exceptional) escape from structures.

<sup>67</sup> As ‘balance of class forces, degree of self-organization, setting of hegemonic discourse, mobilization of institutions and so on’ (Teschke and Lacher, 2007: 570).

defines the form it takes (Knafo, 2010)<sup>68</sup>. So long as we conceive a society as organised in class ways, this definition of agency is relational and presupposes the ‘structure’ as socially contested and dynamic, because the ‘imperatives’ becomes effective only when wielded by social agents whose interests are in conflict with those of others. Social-property relations are what agents act from and what agents act on in an institutionally, politically, and culturally mediated way, and this, not only in times of transition, but in the ongoing modulation of ‘imperatives’.

This re-conceptualisation of agency was crucial in PM’s historicisation of geopolitics and can be opposed to the UCD approach’s structuralist stance (Teschke, 2014)<sup>69</sup>. Both theories undertake the challenge of conceptualising geopolitics as constitutive of social development (rather than as an external factor) and endeavour to explain the divergence, rather than the convergence, of social trajectories. In aiming to produce an International Historical Sociology (Rosenberg, 2006), the UCD approach studies the structural effects of political multiplicity through a universal theory of the ‘international’.<sup>70</sup>

However, the ‘international’ and its unevenness are only superficially transhistorical; as a ‘socio-historical practice’ (Teschke, 2008: 180), eminently specific through space and time, it cannot easily be universalised. UCD as a general abstraction has to function with an

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<sup>68</sup> In fact, taking the behaviours of agents for granted is what leads some authors to infer such an inner logic of the structure, thus reifying it.

<sup>69</sup> PM however flirted for a time with this concept, albeit understood differently than in Rosenberg’s thesis (Dufour, 2007; Matin, 2007; Teschke, 2003, 2005, 2006; Teschke and Lacher, 2007).

<sup>70</sup> The ‘international’ is conceptualised as the ‘dimension of social reality which arises specifically from the coexistence within it of more than one society’ (Rosenberg, 2006: 308). Rosenberg’s interpretation of Trotsky’s (1980) concept of UCD intends to make sense, at the theoretical level, of the perennial fact that discrete societies, each on a particular trajectory of social development, also interact with each others and find themselves inserted into a specific geopolitical context, making completely endogenous (or ‘pre-combination’) development impossible (the second level of UCD as ‘intrinsic’ and transhistoric). The empirical consequence of conceptualising UCD as a general abstraction is a first level of understanding UCD as an overdetermination of development. Social and institutional developmental trajectories must be seen in the context of a geopolitical environment offering constraints and opportunities for the conflictual process of preservation of social power of the elites in specific forms of adaptation. Thus the unevenness of development and the inevitable interaction of societies imply a need for a social theory that is able to account for the fact that the international constantly produces more unevenness and differentiation. On UCD and IR theory, see the *CRoIA* debate (2009) Callinicos and Rosenberg (2008), Rosenberg (1996, 2006, 2010), Matin (2007, 2013), and Hobson (2011). UCD is alternatively conceived as a ‘methodological fix’ (Alison and Anievas, 2010) or as ‘an inescapable context’ (Halliday, 1999).

‘international’ that is analytically given. Yet, sociological explanations do not arise from ‘the fact of inter-societal coexistence and interaction’, but from their nature, so its integration ‘into [a] theoretical conception of social causality’ can only be indirect, better thought of as a methodological premise. The ‘international’ (as variegated territorial *relations* or *socio-spatial* orders) is a ‘structure’ only in the sense that it is modified and used by social groups for their social reproduction. ‘Interactive (inter-societal)’ as well as ‘reproductive (internal social-structural)’ structures or necessities cannot have an inner logic or causal effects (the ‘whip of external necessity’ or ‘the law of a mode of production’) abstracted from history (and agency). In the UCD approach, the ‘international’ has replaced class conflicts as causal determinants.<sup>71</sup>

By contrast, the ‘social history of geopolitical relations’ (Teschke, 2011) starts from the specificity of class conflicts, their outcomes, and the social reproduction of agents they relate to, as enacted dialogically at the internal and external levels. For Teschke (2008, 2011), historicisation prevents the reification of phenomena (e.g. ‘the international’, ‘society’, ‘development’, and the ‘state’) which can be socio-historically traced back to—but not theoretically derived from—<sup>72</sup> a specific (modern) European context. The impact of the international (and, above all, its nature) has to be deciphered for each social transformation studied: geopolitics is as ‘social’ as economics, which the UCD approach arguably recognises but cannot substantiate. The canonical features of the ‘international system’ are historical products of concrete struggles over the form and implementation of surplus extraction, arising from the diverging interests between and among classes over their social reproduction and the varying corresponding strategies implemented. Geopolitics is intervening at every moment (and not as a distinct realm) as it is constitutive of the ways of reproduction of classes. PM contends that the social rationality of agents cannot be fathomed outside a geo- and socio-historically specific and always contested ‘international’.

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<sup>71</sup> The level of generality to which the notions of ‘development’ and society are defined allowed the former to be interpreted in a number of divergent ways as inflexions of social-property regimes (Matin, 2007) or as levels of productive forces (Allinson and Anievas, 2010). Hobson (2011) has also used the concept to explain British late industrialisation.

<sup>72</sup> See Teschke (2003) and Lacher (2006) on the non-coeval emergence of the multiple states system (inside/outside differentiation) and capitalism (economic/political differentiation).

Geopolitical orders are ‘what social agents make of them’ by mobilising their ‘imperatives’ in ways that are historically open, even if they are grounded in prevailing social-property regimes<sup>73</sup>. In pre-capitalist eras, geopolitics is eminently singular as it is based on hierarchically overlapping authority relations in the absence of a settled inside/outside differentiation (Teschke, 2003), and whose set of changing and often conflicting social relations are fundamental to understanding how conflicts between social forces are structured simultaneously at the ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ levels.

## **5. Eurocentrism and Political Marxism**

For the anti-Eurocentric literature, PM’s methodological nationalism turning into normative Eurocentrism and Eurocentred categorisation of the world leads to its belief in the historical superiority of Europe. In respectively countering and furthering these critiques, I will argue that the full extent of PM’s historicist premises for the anti-Eurocentric analysis of world history has yet to be grasped, thereby developing the argument made in Chapter One.

Firstly, PM’s account of the transition to capitalism is deemed Eurocentric. By looking only through the ‘European tunnel of time’ (Blaut, 1993), PM disregards the contributions of non-Western civilisations as a necessary condition for the emergence of capitalism (the fourth meaning of Eurocentrism identified in the Thesis Introduction). Colonialism is then perceived as ‘secondary’, as a consequence of Western capitalism, rather than as having causal significance in its rise (Bhambra, 2011: 7). Brenner’s downgrading of the importance of trade and towns during the Middle Ages and his restrictive conception of capitalism precludes him from seeing that its emergence was happening world-wide (Blaut, 1994). From the standpoint of the UCD approach, Matin (2013) crucially argues for emphasising ‘the geopolitical and geocultural fault-lines and fractures within modern(izing) Europe itself’, in order to counter the ‘internalist’ perspective that views this process as self-contained. According to Matin, Brenner fails to acknowledge that ‘historical processes that

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<sup>73</sup> Geopolitical orders are then deciphered ‘by a historical account of the interplay between the constraining structures of property and authority and their consequences for the goal-oriented yet bounded and antagonistic practices which animate and change these social relations’ (Teschke, 2003: 47).

culminated in the crystallization of capitalism in North Western Europe were international in dynamics and sources’<sup>74</sup>. Everything depends upon what is to be explained, what this notion of ‘crystallization’ means, and what spatial reach must necessarily be taken into account in the light of the process being explained<sup>75</sup>. Contentions about other necessary conditions for the transition are fair, but does it mean that PM is a Eurocentric theory?

For Hobson (2004, 2007), previous ‘Eastern’ achievements and interrupted processes are discarded on the basis of geographical location and remain outside the focus of mainstream analysis, whereas PM’s decision to place the explanatory power on internal variables in the account of the emergence of capitalism is seen as exogenous to the theoretical weight of one factor against another.<sup>76</sup> In short, the fact that PM privileges internal class struggles as the principal explanatory factor of the transition is viewed as normatively problematic in itself. These are however better viewed as contending causal explanations. These critiques become unfairly organised around normative Eurocentrism, rather than seriously engaging with PM on empirical and theoretical disagreements, notably about the sources of social causation, the definition of social processes, and the significance of the differentiation within European trajectories.

Secondly, anti-Eurocentric scholars critique the absence of a systematic PM comparative analysis using non-European cases (the third meaning of Eurocentrism). What is at stake here is the ‘Euro-Marxist’ denial of the ‘non-West’ as ‘the site of historically efficacious change in its own right’ (Blaut, 1993: 45). Later analyses of non-European cases (Brenner and Isett, 2002; Wood, 2003) were indeed more focused on proving their ‘non-development’ compared to post-1688 England, than on genuinely recovering the specificity

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<sup>74</sup> For a similar argument, see Anievas and Nisancioglu (2013).

<sup>75</sup> PM does not rule out the impact of interconnections, but conceptualises differently the ‘heterogeneity of the social’. For example, PM has discussed the role of the demise of the Carolingian Empire and the Norman Conquest in the settings of the transition to capitalism, whose ‘diffusion’ was a long, variegated, and conflictual process (Brenner, 1995; Comminel, 2000; Teschke, 2003).

<sup>76</sup> Hobson (2007: 93) explains that ‘what makes it Eurocentric is the assumption that the West lies at the centre of all things in the world and that the West self-generates through its own endogenous “logic of immanence”’. However, it is unclear why Hobson (mobilising Abu-Loghod, 1989: 12) supposes that all Marxists believe in the inevitability of the emergence of capitalism and have to ‘rationalize why this supremacy *had* to be’.

of their social trajectories, which this thesis endeavours. This critique needs to be further developed, as there is a tendency in Wood's works to stress a 'European' specificity against an all-encompassing non-Western background negatively defined.

Regarding Europe, in certain studies (e.g. Wood, 1995: 19-48, 2008a), there is a tension between, on the one hand, a description of an ideal-typical, exclusive, and evolutionary pan-Western particularity woven around the autonomy of private property (enabling capitalism and political theory<sup>77</sup>) and, on the other hand, a commitment to reconstruct the variegated and (relatively) open-ended nature of European social developments. Wood sometimes seems to follow the famous argument (popularised by Anderson, 1974a) according to which Roman private property opened the path to feudalism, which is conceived in turn as a necessary condition for the emergence of capitalism. In trying to show the specificity of capitalism as a 'privatisation of political power', Wood sketches out schematically the singularity of Western feudalism.

The PM analysis of the transition is however organised against such a thesis that Western feudalism as a whole gave rise to capitalism. PM contends with the assumption that the end of feudalism and the rise of capitalism were a singular social process (Dufour, 2008), in emphasising the singularity of English feudalism amongst highly differentiated institutions of lordship and the divergent social trajectories in early modern Europe which arose out of open-ended social conflicts (Brenner, 1991; Comninel, 2000; Teschke, 2003). This is crucial to PM's anti-Eurocentric de-reification of Europe as a homogenous category and as a unique site of social change.

When it comes to theorising the 'non-West', Wood (2008b) accepts implicitly Godelier's transitional understanding of the AMP (as defined in Chapter Two), broadening it so as to encompass much of the non-Western world until the colonial period.<sup>78</sup> There is a real

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<sup>77</sup> I have strong doubts about the manner in which Wood confines 'political theory' (as a specific form of political thought) to the West, due to its 'three way relation' between producers, propertied and state classes. There are indeed historical grounds to disagree that, on the one hand, this feature was unique to Europe and, on the other hand, that we could generalise this way about the history of all Europe since Ancient Greece.

<sup>78</sup> AMP defines 'bureaucratic states in which the central monarchical power was the principal appropriating

danger here to conflate the diversity of non-Western history into one category, valid across space and time, ‘left over after the canons of European evolution have been established’ (Anderson, 1974b: 549). The earlier Marxist vocabulary of ‘modes of production’ is loaded with such Eurocentric assumptions and postulates based on inadequate historical research. PM’s historical method however challenges the conceptualisation of ‘deviant’ cases from ideal-typical trajectories as ‘incomplete’, within Europe or at the global level. Neither ‘Asia’, the ‘non-West’, nor early modern Europe is to be taken as homogeneous and united entities or categories. To none of them can exceptionalism be attributed, and none of them witnessed a pan-regional simultaneous ‘rise’.

Furthermore, Thompson’s method must be applied to evaluate the adequacy of historical categories. The attention that PM gives to the specificity of social development leads it to historicise the differentiations of the economic and the political, and of the inside and outside. They pertain to a specific European development (capitalist modernity) and as such cannot figure as unproblematically transhistorical analytical assumptions: this is something which is overlooked by most anti-Eurocentric scholars. Analytical categories—from different ‘modes of production’ to the international itself—arose from historiography and are to be conceptualised as contested and historically specific social forms. PM’s historical method enables us to determine historically what belongs, in social theorisations, to the European experience of modernity (or to its interpretations), and what can be generalised as analytical tools to investigate world history. Historical categories are universal insofar as they are built on and correspond to social practices (be they ‘Western’ or ‘Eastern’), and not merely assumed to exist. This historicist insight is necessary to set aside the epistemologies blurred by the European experiences of modernity, whose reification transforms specific European historical features into a method of dividing the world into spheres, thereby implying the universality of capitalist/European categories. Besides being an arguably imprudent theoretical behaviour, dissociating structure from agency or theory from history is a Eurocentric move in itself. This risks to take as ontological givens analytical

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force, extracting surpluses from surrounding villages of peasant producers, where the division between appropriators and producers was a direct relation between state and subjects, and where private property and class were undeveloped’ (Wood, 2008a: 81-82). She discusses in the same terms Minoan and Mycenaean Greece and Imperial China (Wood, 1981, 2003).



derivations from the European experience, and to congeal them into permanent, self-confirmed features of social reality prior to their confrontation with history.

In short, historicising and socialising the establishment of new social forms or regimes precludes a teleology that would lead to Eurocentrism. Relocating the explanatory power to the concrete strategies implemented through an agential reconstruction of specific social trajectories avoids the universalisation of European experience(s) and gives back (their) history to ‘people who were without one’.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter started with an enquiry into the philosophical premises of PM in order to illustrate, from a historicist standpoint, the shortcomings of some works undertaken under the PM umbrella. I then showed that its renewal makes it a legitimate interlocutor in the debate on Eurocentrism. This is due to its powerful historical method, which deconstructs the myth of the uniqueness of the West (and its inverse Eastern image) and understands social trajectories and constructions of the world as *sui generis* and contested, as products of open-ended social conflicts. This, in turn, challenges the widespread ‘transhistoricalisation’ and hence naturalisation of European socio-historical phenomena transformed into analytical tools to study world history.

These crucial contributions of PM regarding specificity, historicity, and agency will be applied to the Chinese trajectory in the subsequent four chapters. A crucial notion inspired by these PM distinctive characteristics will be introduced: the phenomenology of power. By this notion I seek to draw attention to the fact that agents experienced the world differently, in time and space. This implies that the notions of ‘state’, ‘war’, and ‘international system’, among others, must necessarily be historicised in order to understand what agents act from and upon, through a socialised conception of rationality. Social meanings are to be deciphered on a case-by-case basis rather than assumed. Emphasising and borrowing the *sui generis* conceptions of power in time and space is imperative to understand the socio-historical context allowing agents to conceptualise this way their relations to power. In mainstream IR, the concepts relative to the internal and external orderings of power are

taken for granted as being transhistoric and universal, not only over time in Europe (see Teschke, 2003) but also across space. Such a phenomenological conception of power is imperative to counter Eurocentrism, because it enquires into the socio-historical conditions of possibility of the internal/external and economic/political differentiations, thereby precluding the imposition of the vocabulary of European modernity on very different possible conceptions of the world. More generally, PM-informed interrogations of the validity of the categories of analysis used in different accounts of China's history in Sinology and IR will drive these empirical chapters.

## Chapter Four – Transcending the Ontology of Empire in Chinese Imperial History

‘The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been.’

The Romance of Three Kingdoms

The assumption of a unified and stable Chinese Empire, presiding over a Sino-centred wider geopolitical environment and stretching from 200 CE to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, is a pervading organising idea in the historiographical and sociological literature. The properties that enable scholars to maintain the coherence of the Chinese Empire as a meaningful concept refer to its centralised office-system, based on examination and a high degree of literacy, a succession of Chinese dynasties, a particular discourse of Heavenly Mandate, its civil rather than military culture based on Confucianism, and its supreme and hegemonic position within East Asia. These features are regarded to have imparted not only an extraordinary degree of internal stability, cohesion, and duration, but are also widely held to explain the absence of a Chinese ‘take-off’ when compared to the ‘Rise of the West’ – a divergence that manifested itself from the beginning of the early modern period onwards. The ‘case of China’ has thus become a central comparator in the proliferating controversy on the historical geographies of development and non-development, closely tied to the question of the regions’ respective international environments as enabling or disabling conditions for take-off. In other words, controversies in the disciplines of HS and economic history are closely linked to controversies in the field of IR over the spatial ordering principles in hierarchical and anarchical geopolitical ‘systems’.

This chapter subjects the ‘Unified Empire Thesis’ to a historical and theoretical critique and argues that the developmental trajectory of Imperial China is more similar to pre-modern Europe than much of the literature assumes. This argument rests on two sub-arguments: 1) that the dynamics of early modern Europe as a whole are over-stated and problematically theorised and historicised in the mainstream ‘Rise of the West’ literature, and 2) that the history of Imperial China, blinded by the ‘Unified Empire Thesis’, is often ideal-typically constructed against an ideal-typically constructed dynamic Europe. To demonstrate the plausibility of this argument, this chapter critically interrogates the ontologised categories

of the Chinese World Order and the ‘Confucian/office-state’, conceived as antithetical to the ideal-types of the pre-modern European state and its state-system. It is argued that these notions stem from a lack of interrogation of what the ‘international’, ‘empire’, and ‘state’ socio-historically meant for agents in Imperial China. This in turn hides the similarity of authority relations and geopolitical relations of Europe and East Asia in their pre-modern anchoring in conflicts around property and power.

This argument is theoretically grounded in the tradition of PM, which critiques the persistent tendency within IR to proceed with unproblematised political and spatial categories based on the universalisation, in the analysis, of the inside/outside and economic/political differentiations. For Imperial China, this means that concepts based on late European (and above all incomplete and often radically backdated) developments are mobilised, without enquiring into their socio-historical conditions of possibility, to prove the uniqueness of behaviours of East Asian actors within such ‘international systems’ or ‘societies’. I shall argue that only a sociological enquiry into the origins of Chinese ‘international’ institutions and into the social agency (re)producing them allows for an explanation of their transformations without having to resort to the myth of Chinese Confucian singularity.

In this, IR scholars, such as David Kang, and Yongjin Zhang and Barry Buzan, passively echo commonplace assumptions in Sinology. Debates around the ‘blockage’ of China rest upon postulates about the organisation of the Confucian bureaucratic state and its scholar-gentry on which is built the very static image of Imperial China. This static image is translated to East Asian IR, in a narrative in which the unitary and enduring Chinese Empire presided over a pacified geopolitical environment. The Chinese tribute-system and office-system are deemed to operate, at least in incipient forms, since the beginning of the ‘universal empire’, as it is held that there was a single Chinese Empire (Fairbank, 1981; Weber, 1951). However, their consolidations are usually attributed to the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties, from which this chapter, as a methodological prelude to the historical reconstruction of this period, will borrow empirical examples. I shall demonstrate that retracing the political economy around shares of state power and grounding

geopolitical endeavours in contestations over land and people permits us to consider the Chinese bureaucracy and the tribute-system as elements to be explained, rather than perennial features whose existence is taken for granted. Most crucially, their sociological characterisations as being at the core of pre-modern social conflicts enables us to view Chinese development on par with European pre-modern polities, which were similarly not on the verge of ‘modernity’.

The chapter proceeds in three steps. Section One critically discusses the extant IR literature on the medieval and early modern East Asian international system, centered around the Chinese Empire. Here, the main contention is that Neorealist and English School interpretations remain defective. The former prioritise systemic ordering principles – hierarchy/anarchy – in the abstract, without providing socially-grounded explanations of the specific nature and generating dynamics of East Asian political geography and geopolitical relations. The latter relies primarily on the normative discourse (the Confucian ideology) inherent in the imperial Chinese self-understandings of an alleged ‘Chinese international society’, without disclosing the socio-political power struggles over land and people this ‘society’ was based on. Because they divorce Chinese IR from its domestic politics or are unable to account for this relation, and because they furthermore rely on the ‘Unified Empire Thesis’, they reify their own unit of analysis, whose interactions they aim to explain.

Section Two returns to central interpretations within the more specialised traditional historiography on Imperial China. Those literatures known under the label of ‘gentry studies’ in Sinology organise their interpretation around a status-analysis (often derived from a Weberian sociology of types of domination) of the imperial bureaucracy. The argument is that much of the IR discourse relies passively on these literatures, which tend to restrict their analyses to the centrality of the imperial bureaucracy, often informed by Weberian categories, in abstraction from conflicts analyses. Here, the notions of status and elites tend to be detached from the analysis of wider social relations. This includes the fiscal (tax) and lordly (rent) relations between the state and landlords and the mass of direct producers – the peasantry. In conceiving of the ‘gentry’ as a stratum of their own, they hide

the class relations and the transfer of surplus from the direct producers to the dominant and ruling classes, including the imperial state.

And it is here, at the level of contested vertical class relations that the issue of a HS of the Chinese Empire, informed by PM, provides crucial insights into the ‘internal’ political structure and dynamics of the empire and its ‘external’ relations. For the vertical class conflicts implicated the horizontal conflicts among the various members of the Chinese polity, which translated, amongst others, into the ‘tribute-system’. This demonstrates the *sui generis* nature of Chinese international order. Understanding this requires not only an analysis based on conflicting social relations, but also a terminological specification of the self-definition of Chinese political geography, which clarifies this unique vision of the ‘world’ – how the world appears to them. Section Three demonstrates how this process of social and idiomatic specification serves also as a warning that the import of specifically Western IR concepts – state, the international, hierarchy, anarchy, balance-of-power – leads to serious Eurocentric distortions and terminological anachronisms.

### **1. International Relations Theory and the Chinese Empire**

In this section, I will first introduce the proponents of the concept of Chinese World Order in IR, which has gained popularity both in Realist and English School agendas, through the respective works of Kang, and Zhang and Buzan. I will demonstrate how this notion, supposed to capture the specificity of East Asian interactions, takes for granted agential motivation rather than explaining it, leading them to be unable to account for the transformations of their object of analysis. I will subsequently argue that their conceptualisations of war and of East Asian units are fundamentally unsound. De-ontologising them from their derivation of European model, itself historically flawed, is essential to go beyond merely positing the World Order’s existence and immutability. This demonstrates the necessity of problematising hierarchy and sovereignty by understanding them as historically varying socio-spatial relations.

#### **1.1 Hierarchical order in Chinese history**

The tribute-system traditionally refers to the bestowals of titles by the Chinese Empire to

'vassal' units who would then kowtow before the emperor and pay him tribute. Prominent Western sinologist Fairbank's (1981) theory of the Chinese World Order, based on its tribute system, has become the springboard for debates in IR among Realists and English School authors during the last decade<sup>79</sup>. The relative peacefulness of the East Asian system, compared to its Westphalian counterpart, is explained through a gradient of positions, ranging from ideational emphasis on the Confucian uniqueness (Kelly, 2012) to power analysis underlying the rationality of strategic interactions (Zhou, 2011).

Kang seeks to provide for a neo-Realist explanation of the 'anomaly' of East Asia's peaceful hierarchical system by introducing the importance of states' preferences. He contests the Neorealist Eurocentrism of transforming particular security relations of the European state-system into transhistorical and universal assumptions about the conflictual nature of hierarchy and the application of the principle of balance of power. Kang characterises China's peaceful 1368-1841 period as stemming from the acceptance of the Confucian rules of the game and China's wider hegemony, complementing the theorisation of polarity. The international society of the four Sinic states (China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam<sup>80</sup>) compelled them to behave peacefully among themselves (i.e. differently than in the larger unipolar system in which fighting with the nomads occurred). Furthermore, Kang argues that participation in the Chinese World Order was motivated by an implicit agreement on the sovereignty of the units. According to Kang's criteria<sup>81</sup>, only two wars occurred in this period between the core Sinicised states within this system of formal hierarchy and informal equality. The assumption is that states sharing common Chinese culture and institutions (willingly emulated through time by the three others) will have had

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<sup>79</sup> Bozeman (1960) had, however, already introduced this puzzle about the distinctiveness of the Chinese World Order in IR. Despite their utilisation of a Chinese historical concept and institution (the tribute system), such theses on East Asia have to be distinguished from the call for an 'IR with Chinese characteristics', or the Tianxia approach, reviving Chinese classical thought (Wang and Buzan, 2014).

<sup>80</sup> I will follow Kang's use of such modern-day terminology here, whilst I will adopt the proper names of the polities in my own historical reconstruction.

<sup>81</sup> For Kang (following Swope), a major war must imply an 'intent for conquest' and involve at least 1000 deaths; anything below this would otherwise be termed as a 'border skirmish'. Kang focuses on such wars between the four Sinic states, *de facto* excluding conflicts with 'nomads', raids, or territorial expansion against other political units. Kang does not consider 'internal conflicts' and wars of 'regime consolidation' (i.e. conflicts between contending dynasties outside the accepted dates of regime transitions). The two recognised wars were the Chinese invasion of Vietnam (1407-1428) and the Imjin wars, the Japanese attempt to invade China through Korea (1592-1598).

no need for war as long as the tribute-system worked as a tool which regulated trade and diplomatic activities. As norms based on equality lessen the worries about state survival in the Westphalian system and enforce mechanisms (e.g. balance of power) to put those norms into effect, so did the acceptance of the set of rules on inter-state relations within Chinese hegemony. The relations between these Confucian states and what are broadly qualified as 'nomads' did not partake of the Chinese World Order, as the 'nomads' contested China's normative order. Within this, it is posited that only when the dominance of the Chinese World Order was shattered, did conflicts occur.

Buzan and Zhang (2014) go further in investigating the reasons of the peacefulness of the East Asian system, as an instance of 'regional international society' worth inquiring into for its anti-Eurocentric deconstruction of the uncontested hegemony and uniformity of the global Western one. They underline the emergence of this international society immediately following the fall of the multi-state system of Ancient China, retracing its long evolution since the Han era until its institutionalisation under the Tang dynasty. Zhang and Buzan's (2012) specific contention is that the East Asian order reflected the features of a distinctive international society powered by the Confucian promotion of cosmic and social harmony maintained by the intersubjective construction and re-affirmation of the normative order in which the respective states had been socialised. It is precisely this agreed-on and never challenged Confucian 'moral purpose of the state' which gave this order its uniqueness and resilience despite its ups and downs, whereas the contestation of this order is argued to have merely reinforced its legitimacy in the long run.

### 1.2 Historical and logical shortcomings

Does Kang succeed in demonstrating, within his own definition of states and wars, why the East Asian international society was so peaceful? For Kang (2010b: 602), 'The simple explanation for why this system was stable is that China was a status quo hegemon, and the other states in the region knew and accepted this'. The argument seems tautological: the acceptance of Chinese dominance (even without formal tributary relations, as was the case for Vietnam and Japan for long periods) guaranteed peace and stability, and the signs of this acceptance are that surrounding states did not contest this by waging war. We are left with



no means to test that assumption within Kang's framework. Kang mentions other signs of acceptance of China's hegemony, such as the use of Confucian institutions and discourses. However, these emulations occurred centuries before the actual working of the international society, so other reasons must have motivated the adoptions of such Chinese practices. Thus, can these really figure as signs of recognition of the Chinese World Order? Why did peacefulness not occur in preceding periods in which Kang's own criteria were met?<sup>82</sup> Moreover, the positing of China's hegemon status rests on a mix of material and cultural considerations, requiring in theory both<sup>83</sup>, but Kang's historical enquiries implicitly demonstrate that this was the case only for Korea and only for short periods, thereby illustrating the shakiness of the grounds on which his core theoretical assumption rests. Since what provides peace is the recognition of the normative hierarchical order, wars would naturally have to occur as contestation of postulated shared norms or 'When the Hierarchy Broke down' (Kang, 2005: 71). When engaging with the empirics of the only wars (according to his definition) that occurred in his period of review, however, Kang is at pains to explain the causes of these wars in their relation to his alleged theoretical sources of war (opposition to, or weakness of, the Chinese World Order), let alone the absence of additional occurrences of war in cases where Kang's supposed war catalysts were present.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> According to Kang, the three other participants in the international society (Korea, Japan, and Vietnam) indeed acquired state-like characteristics respectively from the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> Centuries onward. Under the early Tang and Yuan dynasties, China could be said to be a hegemon. The Yuan dynasty however attempted to invade Vietnam and Japan, and succeeded in Korea. The Tang Empire was not less war-like with Korea and Japan, having in addition Vietnam under its rule. Kang (2010a: 15) tests more thoroughly his concepts in Ming and early Qing eras 'because [these] represent[...] the culmination of centuries of state-building in East Asia and at that point the East Asian international system was at its most complete and developed'. This weak justification of the circumscription of the period points out to his evading of the question of the social origins of, and variations within, the order.

<sup>83</sup> Kang (2010: 148) excludes the 'nomads' from his thesis because for these, the tribute system was a 'means toward an economic end rather than a full-blown embrace of [its] full meaning, legitimacy and authority.' Consequently, the adequacy of Kang's thesis relies on whether we can prove that Korea, Vietnam, and Japan saw the tribute system according to a non-strategic logic.

<sup>84</sup> Regarding the Imjin wars, can we prove that the Japanese invasion was related to a lack of Chinese leadership? If so, why did it occur at that time, and why was it the only case? Why did Japan fail in this if the Ming was in hegemonic disarray? Or was it the case that Japan was contesting China's hegemony? Why then? Kang resorts to saying that Japan's motivations remain 'unclear' (2010a: 94, 106), listing historians' conflicting views on the causes of the war without selecting one, or consistently linking these to his thesis on Chinese instability or Japan's contestation of hegemony. According to Kang, a key factor for the other instance of war was the Vietnamese reluctance toward accepting Chinese legitimacy in the World Order (Kang, 2010a: 70, 99). Since Japan, however, had the greatest difficulty in accepting Chinese supremacy and in much more overt ways than Vietnam, why did we not witness Chinese retaliation as in the case of Vietnam? Similar questions likewise remain unanswered regarding the Ming's invasion of Vietnam. Why did the Ming engage in war for

In Kang's work, the constant shifting between material and cultural motivations happens in an *ad hoc* manner, preventing clear causal mechanisms from emerging. Furthermore, what little of Kang's theses that can be said to abide by such mechanisms does not resist their testing against history. Even while preserving its very disputable criteria for what counts as war and state, the historical situations which do not comply with his theory have then to be understood as anomalies, with Kang resorting to contingent historical explanations outside his theoretical framework.

Whilst digging further in the 'deep constitutional structure' of this international society, Zhang and Buzan do not pretend that the actors of the Chinese World Order abided by its rules or that tributary relations mattered. Their point is rather that it worked as an 'organised hypocrisy'. Zhang and Buzan's model thus accommodates the recurrence of anomalies to the working of the World Order by emphasising its flexibility, which figures at the same time as its 'virtue'<sup>85</sup>. Variations in the configurations of the system, even its episodic disappearance, are understood as instances of intersubjective re-adjustment, which cannot be conceived otherwise since no other 'moral purpose' than the Chinese Confucian discourse was put forward at this time. It is argued that even when such rules were violated, their legitimacy endured. With this, Zhang and Buzan's model thus clearly shares the flaws of Kraser's notion in 'dissolv[ing] IR theory into history' (Teschke, 2003: 26). To reconcile the persistence of the discourse with its episodic concreteness, Zhang and Buzan (2012: 26) are forced to say that the behaviours of the actors within the order are 'inspired and constrained' as much by 'these states' rational strategic, political and economic calculations' as by the system's norms. How are we to decide? The Chinese World Order as organised hypocrisy appears to be an elegant way to evade the conceptualisation of its causal effect

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this particular Chinese dissatisfaction in its involvements in wars of succession, which were many (such as the Ming-Korea 'incident' in 1389, and the Qing-Vietnam conflict in 1788-1802)? How could Kang say that this was an anomaly, as 'the four preceding centuries had seen a stable relationship between the two' (Kang, 2010a: 98), whilst Vietnam experienced many decades of repeated invasions by the Yuan dynasty? How could Kang claim that there were never debates within the court about potential invasions of other Confucian states (see Lorge, 2013 on this)?

<sup>85</sup> It is posited that the tribute-system was culturally open, but not always so, and sometimes also involved force. The Chinese World Order is understood here as having had core principles, but its design varied according to geopolitical and economic motives.

on actors. Recognising that the Chinese World Order was firstly a discursive practice has the merit of being closer to the reality than Kang's belief in its historical continuity, but it loses all explanatory power.

For Kang, the mere existence of the system explains the behaviours of the units, and the mere idea of it, for Zhang and Buzan, implies that even behaviours running contrary to the system have to be understood in relation to it. It has to presuppose, without means to test it, that the Confucian prism was the prime motive for rulers. Furthermore, it either assumes an unproblematic continuity in the use and adhesion to the tribute-system on the parts of China and on the part of the different states - notwithstanding the dynasty and its domestic and international objectives -, or it leaves no means for understanding these changes.

### 1.3 Beyond the World Order model. A re-assessment of the significance of empire

Kang, Zhang, and Buzan focus on the World Order in the objective of finding an equivalent to the Westphalian treaties and international society in Europe. This might well be the case, if we consider these as myths (Teschke, 2003), or at least as a set of institutions to be explained in terms of broader and, crucially, socialised practices put forth by agents to advance their power, and not as an *explanans* for it. I shall contend with Kang and Zhang and Buzan's theses on their selection of relevant units, on their definition of wars, and more generally on the types of interactions to take into account towards understanding the East Asian geopolitical system, in order to emphasise what should be considered into an alternative framework.

#### 1.3.1 Units in East Asia

Kang's category of 'state', as a central administration monopolising violence on a defined territory, is inaccurate for the pre-modern period, in Europe as in East Asia. Kang's grounds for dismissing 'non-state actors' – i.e. because these are not taken into account for the European state-system – is therefore misleading. Firstly, he severely underestimates the instability of polities and frontiers by claiming that 'In East Asia, the number of countries and boundaries composing the hierarchy has remained essentially the same since AD 200.' (Kang, 2005: 72). This affirmation clashes with the facts of the Chinese, Korean, and

Vietnamese Empires' overly changing frontiers, their recurrent internal divisions into multiple kingdoms, as well as the multiple instances of incorporations of parts of or complete territories of Vietnam and Korea into the Chinese Empire. His model cannot accommodate the implications of the very high number of conflicts belonging to his category of 'border skirmishes'. This is the case as his definition fails to grasp the pre-modern constitution of territory and direct producers as sources of revenues, which explains why they were thus sought after prizes of foreign policy.

Secondly, Kang's dichotomisation of polities reveals deep misunderstandings of East Asian historical context. It is highly questionable that the actors that Kang qualifies as 'nomads' (the Mongols, Uighurs, Khitans, Jurchens, and Tibetans) were all indeed nomads, and that they belonged to a different category than 'state actors'.<sup>86</sup> Nomad/sedentary or Confucian/non-Confucian dichotomies do not hold against East Asia's history, and merely begs the question of diffusion of norms and institutions.<sup>87</sup> The sociopolitical diversity of East Asia (as of Europe) is to be explained rather than dismissed, if only because it holds fundamental keys to understanding the nature of pre-modern geopolitics. Understanding the social origins of war illustrates why no unique or twice naturalised models of state-formation can adequately describe East Asia's history.

### 1.3.2 Conceptualising Chinese wars

Kang's method (not questioned by Zhang and Buzan) to delineate wars is based on criteria of understanding post-1816 Western conflicts (the Correlates Of War project) and hence is

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<sup>86</sup> Kang's criteria for selecting the countries are not consistent or clearly demarcated. It is not self-evident that Japan, Korea, and Vietnam can be understood as the 'more powerful' or the 'biggest and strongest' states, considering that the Manchus managed to invade Korea and China, to say nothing of the previous 'alien' rule' of 'Chinese territories' by the Khitans, Mongols, and Jurchens. Kang's choice of his four 'state-like units' furthermore relies on them being 'more institutionalized', 'more sinicized', 'more Confucianized', or 'more consolidated'. It excludes for this reason the kingdoms of Siam, Burma, and Java, as well as 'nomads' with state structures or other 'civilizational' marks (Kang, 2010a: 144). Many of Kang's 'nomads' without 'settled agriculture' (2010a: 140), such as the Jurchens and the Khitans, were indeed in fact mostly sedentary and built polities contending, on equal terms (Rossabi, 1983), with the Song dynasty. The 'nomad' polities also borrowed Chinese practices. See for example Schneider (2011) on the issue of the Sinicisation of the Jin.

<sup>87</sup> Zhang and Buzan (2012: 25) affirm, as does Kang, that 'shared values generated highly similar government forms'. This conception of the diffusion of Chinese state forms, as causally stemming from Confucian values embraced by Korea, Japan, and Vietnam due to the Chinese normative influence is highly problematic when pitched against the history of their state-formations.

problematic in itself. Kang's own data nonetheless show that territorial expansion, outside China's coveted territories, continued and that alliances against other units were part of the arrangement. This is the case as the tribute-system in a broad sense, including in addition all its participants ('nomads' and non-Confucian states), was rather at least partially aimed towards the settlement of territory claims. Such conflicts were struggles towards the negotiation of sources of revenues, as in the form of direct producers from which to extract and redistribute surplus. Bringing the 'nomads' and non-Confucian states back in also stresses the importance of monopoly over trade routes, negotiated partition of other political entities, and tributary payment in exchange for non-contestation of sovereignty claims<sup>88</sup>. We must understand the Chinese World Order in the complexity of its hierarchical or equal relations between the units, in its infringement of the internal/external delimitation, and ultimately in its impact on the Chinese social property regimes. 'In all cases of strong rivals [of China], the particular forms of the relationships – equal adversaries, fictive kin, or lord-vassal – were negotiated through diplomacy and military attacks or threats' (Skraff, 2012: 108).

'Nomads' impacted Chinese socio-spatial relations beyond the commonly encountered delineation of the 'nomads' position as one of subordination in the early Tang (after the conquests), then more or less as equal bargaining partners in mid-Tang (as with the Tibetan empire in 783), and finally Song inferiority to these (and the tribute given to the Khitans and then the Jurchens). Tang China relied on nomads' for its defence against 'internal' as well as 'external' enemies, and their changing allegiance, even to other Chinese parties, weighed heavily on the outcomes of conflicts, as the mid-Tang rebellions demonstrate. Impact in internecine and succession wars was a two-sided coin and the postulate of an outside/inside distinction confuses more than it reveals.<sup>89</sup> Sovereignty was always relative and had to be won and maintained; the 'multipolar competition' over the powerful 'nomad'

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<sup>88</sup> Respective examples of this can be seen in the Tang's intermittent control over the much coveted Central Asian territories, the Song/Jin pact against the Khitan Liao, and Song treaties with the Jurchens and Tanguts.

<sup>89</sup> Even during 'peaceful' times, 'nomads' did not always prefer bargains with the emperor rather than with local/regional commanders. The same Chinese tactics to bind internal factions were used towards the 'nomads': marriages, bestowal of fictitious kinship, or relative independence in exchange for tribute.

units was a crucial part of this.<sup>90</sup> This rested on a delicate power struggle involving intra-ruling class contending strategies within each polity, which thus cannot be explained at the 'international' level only, or even primarily at this level. Conceptualising war in pre-Yuan China necessitates showing that the way it was able to negotiate its 'external' relationships rested upon its resolution of internal conflicts and varying patterns of extraction and redistribution of revenues. These, in turn, were simultaneously shaped by its spatial configuration, and the 'nomads' occupied an important place in this.<sup>91</sup>

By circumventing the origins, variations, and groundings of the tribute-system, it shifts from a sociopolitical practice, an institution to be understood, to the rank of an ideal-type through which are reified East Asian 'inter-state' relations. After all, even if the initial proponent of the concept, Fairbank, provides for no means to understand this, he at least recognised that the tribute-system acquired different meanings for the Chinese dynasties, from defence during the Song, expansion for the Yuan, to stability for the Qing (Zhang, 2009). Overall, relations both among Sinic polities and with their neighbours did not conform to any universal rule, thus needing an alternative model, a social history of geopolitical relations, able to make sense of changing socio-spatial practices by grounding them in social property regimes and conflicts.

## **2. The Chinese Empire in Traditional Historiography**

The assumptions of these IR scholars about Imperial China rest on a passive importation of mainstream findings in Sinology. The notion of Chinese World Order indeed relies on the

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<sup>90</sup> This was epitomised during the 'turbulent transition' of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century (Worthy, 1983) but this was also an underlying feature of all pre-Yuan China.

<sup>91</sup> Examples of this include the changes of the balance of power in late 7<sup>th</sup> Century Tang China. A new military system on the borders was implemented to face 'nomadic' threats, whilst coping with the halt of geopolitical accumulation. It gave rise not only to regional military governors, internecine wars, unrest, further heterogeneity, and an increase of peasant surplus extraction, but also to the informal partition of China. In turn, these autonomous governors struck alliances with diverse nomads, notably the regional Shato Turk warlords. One of them ruled the Shanxi region during the late Tang and reunited North China during the 'Five Dynasties' period. Another example of the impact of changing socio-spatial configurations of the Chinese Empire derived from the massive settling of nomads on early Tang borders and their integration in its military system. The Tangut Xi Xia emerged this way, and proved later to be instrumental in the Northern Song debacle, leading to its confinement in the South. The combined territorial losses, increasing military expenditures, and obligations of tribute were important facts in the struggle for power among landlords and the imperial polity, which was then also increasingly faced with peasants' uprisings upon whom the fiscal burden had shifted.

postulate of a Confucian bureaucratic office-state. In this section, I will firstly show that important pitfalls pervade this literature, with the significant consequence of leaving the Weberian framework unable to account for social change in Imperial China. Secondly, I will propose an alternative method through which we can conceptualise the Chinese bureaucracy, imperial ideology, and political geography, as embedded in a political economy of shares of political power.

### 2.1 Pitfalls in Chinese history

In Sinology, the notion of the bureaucratic state rests on the even more long lasting myths of the ‘universal empire’ undergoing ‘dynastic cycles’. According to this last paradigm, dynasties are seen as declining more or less naturally, the last emperors losing their might or morality until an unsullied dynasty was understood as regaining the task of rule.<sup>92</sup> The specific reliance on the latter has fallen out of fashion. Nonetheless, it has left an enduring legacy on the study of China within the wider literature. The fact that few historians have contested the Chinese imperial ideology has de-militarised its history, naturalised the idea of a single Chinese Empire, and presented its division as a deviance from the norm (Lorge, 2005). In this section, after having revealed how IR studies of Imperial China subscribe to these broad paradigms in Sinology, I will further investigate the Weberian conception of the state inherited from these paradigms.

The IR proponents of the Chinese World Order are perfect examples of passive reliance on these two interlinked paradigms, as they take for granted the Confucian peaceful inclination and the continuity of the empire over time. Kang, Buzan, and Zhang thus fall prey to a longer tradition within IR, avoiding any serious engagement with historiographical debates. The same is true of mainstream and critical accounts of the ‘Rise of the West’ and the ‘Great Divergence’, which similarly abide to those two paradigms on Imperial China. As I showed in Chapter One, the narratives of the ‘Rise of the West’, from neo-institutionalist, Marxist, and neo-Weberian perspectives alike, generally view Imperial China as a

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<sup>92</sup> Dynastic cycles had also been widely claimed to have followed population decline (Usher, 1989; Chu and Lee, 1994), climate change (Zhang *et al.*, 2005) or the development of nomad empires surrounding China (Barfield, 1989; Lattimore, 1962). The advocates of the AMP and of the thesis on parasitic regimes (Fairbank and Goldman, 2006) also partake of such explanations.

stagnating and enduring empire, its rent-seeking behaviours unchecked by geopolitical competition and/or a noble or enterprising merchant class (i.e. as the mere mirror image of Europe). Even Hui (2007), who starts by contesting this premise of an enduring universal empire implicitly fall back on the idea that Imperial China remained more or less the same in its social organisation, pointing toward a naturalised and transhistorical factor, war, to explain the waxing and waning of dynasties. Such a Neo-Weberian stance on the perennial tasks of the rulers in charge of maintaining order within and without accommodates very well the wide-spread postulate of the conflict-free Chinese tax-office state. The California School, like Hui, also presumes the unchanging nature of the Chinese bureaucratic state. Wong (1997; and Rosenthal, 2011) additionally grounds this autonomy of the ruling class as an outcome of the Confucian tradition. In short, Realist, English School, neo-institutionalist, Marxist, neo-Weberian, and California School authors all fail in bringing IR beyond orthodox Sinology.

Sinology is however a lively field. The historiographical debates on Imperial China were traditionally framed by the divide between the orthodox Marxist emphasis on economic relations between landlords and peasants<sup>93</sup> and the Weberian account of the office-holding status group. A move away from this false dilemma where the methodological choice is confined between the analyses of ‘economic’ or ‘political’ relations was long overdue. In fact, none of these relations could successfully be studied in abstraction from the other, especially in pre-capitalist societies, without leaving the analysis vulnerable to the fiction of liberal modern terminology. Significant attempts to go beyond this false dilemma - in Japanese scholarship and in Western local history - are, however, still found wanting,

The ‘gentry studies’ were pioneered by Wolfram Eberhard (1952), Chang Chung-Li (1962), and Ho Ping ti (1962) and posit, throughout Imperial China’s history, the gentry acting on the behalf of the state through cultural benevolence. In the footsteps of Weber, this approach focuses on the complementarities of the elite, defined by its degree- and/or office-

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<sup>93</sup> The debates within Chinese Marxism have often remained at the level of attributing pre-conceived modes of production to specific periods of history. See for example Dirlik (1985), Kamashi (1990), and Schwartz (1954).



holding, in its relationship with the state to form an enduring and meritocratic bureaucratic system. This proceeds from the alleged uniqueness of China's most important social group, the literati, compared to the West's landed aristocracy and bourgeoisie. The central focus of much of the literature on China is mainly placed on establishing the degree of social mobility within the office-state, a debate put forward by Kracke (1947)<sup>94</sup>, or on creating a typology of social stratification within the gentry. These theses are strongly associated with the 'dynastic cycles' paradigm, as the closeness of interests between the gentry and the state are deemed to follow, and be indicators of, the strength of the latter.

The 'gentry studies' avoids the anchoring of this 'elite' in broader power relations, which is only partially overcome in subsequent trends in Chinese historiography, because of their understanding of the gentry as a status, i.e. defined by its monopoly over social prestige. The existence of the 'gentry society' relies on its meritocratic recruitment in the bureaucratic system. For these 'gentry studies', the very nature of the status of official, conferred by the state through examination selection, entails that this group shall pursue the same interest as the state. The prevalence of this status in the ordering of Chinese society is thus posited as pre-empting 'feudal' tendencies and the impetus to build estates. The categorisation of officialdom as a status group blurs its potentially conflictual interest with other landlords, as well as with the ruling house. Officials are not conceived also as contenders in the distribution of revenues. This conundrum arises from the fact that the Weberian approach does not allow for conceptualising how exploitation and domination are intrinsically linked, in variegated and conflictual ways, in pre-capitalist societies. It becomes difficult for these authors to appreciate the variations in the social power of the ruling class, especially during periods of social changes or of 'divided China'. This is so, notably, as this is not straightforwardly a 'political' (understood in a strict sense) power, but a power that can be expressed in multiple extra-economic forms - the forms it took furthermore being at the core of struggles determining the access to labour surplus. The pitfalls brought by this focus on status have thus important implications for the very objective of 'gentry studies', that is the understanding of the uniqueness of Imperial China's

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<sup>94</sup> See Davis (1986) and Lee (1985) for a defence of this position, and Wang (2013) for a comprehensive review of this debate.

state. By contrast, I argue that the state was foremost the location of the institutionalisation of, and contestation over, the manner through which property was politically constituted, and the fruits of exploitation were extracted and redistributed. Focussing on political power pursued for its own sake, in abstraction of these dynamics, gives a very partial, if not reified and static, portrayal of the Chinese state.

The branch of Western Sinology most influenced by Japanese scholarship has moved beyond the exclusive focus on degree-holding, and contested the postulate of harmony between the state's and the gentry's interests. These scholars instead highlight the tensions and the changes over time in these relations, uncover important aspects of geographical and temporal variations in elite domination, and enquire into routes leading to official positions alternative to examinations<sup>95</sup>. Their historicisation of the relation between the gentry and the state allows for anchoring shifting strategies of the elite in the broader social context, rather than taking for granted their resulting from dynastic healthiness. Despite this, these scholars mainly broaden the 'gentry studies' paradigm, by still defining the elite through the prism of its participation in state activities, without asking why these families were seeking such 'political' power, beyond vague references to the preservation of their status or dominance. Such works suffer from a nebulous definition of 'elite', especially in terms of property relations: 'local prominence' or 'wealthy' are the closest by which these come to approximate such relations, without enquiring into social power properly. Overall, these works fall short of revealing the simultaneous 'political' and 'economic' base of power.

In opposition to the Weberian status conceptual framework in which class stands uneasily, I will instead advocate for the historicisation, in space as well as in time, of the class relations terminology. The landlords were in a class relation with the peasants. Those who also acted as officials (outside of the imperial house) or were degree-holders did not however belong to a status group: their prevalence rather signals contingent strategies of

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<sup>95</sup> Scholars interested in regional variations or temporal continuity of families include Hartwell (1982), Hymes (1986), and Skinner (1977). On the history of examinations, see Chaffee (1995) and Elman (2000). Among influential local histories within 'gentry studies' figure Esherick and Rankin (1990) and Zurndorfer (1989). The recent trend in 'gentry studies' arguing for a Song-Yuan-Ming transition (Smith and von Glahn, 2003) proposes a prelude to the 'early modern paradigm', rather than a proper challenge to it (more on this in Chapter Six).

landlords, which have to be deciphered in specific contexts. As originating from a relational concept, classes should be defined historically in their changing opposed interests, allowing for the conceptualisation of social conflicts within the ruling class as well as with the producers, on the basis of varying socio-institutional environments.

This issue of conceptualising the Chinese polity in a broader agential sociology of power, therefore, needs to be tackled before turning to its consequences for Chinese political geography. For all its incomparably sophisticated state structure, court etiquette, literary culture, and bureaucratic procedures having spread over an immense territory, Imperial China still subscribed to pre-modern patterns; these impressive features were thus governed by conflicts over social power deployed in intrinsically imbricated spheres.

## 2.2 Myth vs. history of the office-state

The civil service office-system and its concomitant system of written examination is certainly one of the chief pillars of nearly all historical study of China<sup>96</sup>. In this section, I shall contend with the pervasive idea that 'For twelve centuries social rank in China has been determined more by qualification for office than by wealth' (Weber, 1951: 107). The Chinese state was both a source of power and the object of contention.

Firstly, acquiring 'gentry' status through examination was a means of reproducing social power. This was the case both for those who did not fill a position in the state (focussing mainly on gaining tax exemption, legal privileges<sup>97</sup>, and access to official hearings that this status conferred) and for actual officials, who were given 'official lands' from which to derive additional incomes<sup>98</sup> and who used every means available, legal and borderline legal, to keep revenues. Social power was reproduced, on the one hand, since some kind of tax

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<sup>96</sup> Its varying social compositions and political importance shall be studied in the empirical sections of the thesis. To summarise, from the Tang onwards, examinations conferred a degree, but not an official position. Officials could serve in county (the lowest level), prefecture magistrate, or circuit (provincial) offices, and very few managed to secure higher-ranking positions in court. The highest degrees and offices were less accessible, as these were monopolised by extended imperial families being granted preferential access.

<sup>97</sup> See McKnight (1985) on the legal privileges degrees could confer during the Song era.

<sup>98</sup> Official position assured provisional land grant until the Ming dynasty. The revenues gathered from these official lands are estimated to have been seven times higher than the salaries for low officials (comprising 60 to 80% of the bureaucrats) during the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century (Kuhn, 2009: 135).

exemption was bestowed to families with ties to officials. Officially, this exemption was restricted to labour tax during late Tang and Song, but meant that such official families had means to also partially evade the land tax. On the other hand, official tenure was also itself very lucrative. The prefecture and country official appropriation of a personal share from the surpluses of collected state-set annual tax quotas, for instance, was to be expected. In this, officials had immense latitude and relied on a complex system whereby they levied additional fees through clerks, a practice towards which the ruling houses had to accommodate<sup>99</sup>.

Secondly, the ideal-type of the meritocratic system does not conform to its historical deployment. In general, the impersonal character of the state apparatus recruitment is overrated: positions in court were always immune to the widely postulated meritocratic selection process and the examination system was not the most defining pathway towards official positions as it is generally postulated to have been. Degree-holding was only one route to office-holding, and not the more important.<sup>100</sup> Throughout the examination system's history, 'special facilitated degrees for licentiates, hereditary privileges for some officials, purchase of degrees by merchants' were more than 'shortcomings in fairness' (Elman, 1991: 23). It exemplifies the fact that a share of state power was not only a highly valued commodity, but also to be 'purchased' through political means<sup>101</sup>. The 'rule of avoidance' (the impossibility for an official to serve either with kin or within his native district), by which scholars generally posit a rational character of the state bureaucracy, must also be socialised and historicised: it was not implemented to the same extent in every

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<sup>99</sup> County offices combined judicial and taxation powers and policing means to enforce them (at least on peasants). The capacity of the state to regulate its local officials was tenuous, even with the Song's additional layer of officials, the circuit intendants, at the 'provincial' level (foremost studied by Lo, 1974).

<sup>100</sup> Fairbank and Merle (2006: 94) note that the percentage of officials coming from the examination route increased merely from 15% in the mid-Tang (data corroborated by Twitchett, 1976) to 30% during the Song. Bol (1990) finds a mere 5% of degree-holding officials during the Tang, similar to the 6% estimated by Sun (1959) as cited in Moore (2004: 19). Other routes leading to an official post during the Tang and Song were through noble titles, *yin* privilege (whereby capital officials bestowed similar status to members of their family), service in the guard, management of public funds, plain recommendation, purchase of office, or promotion from clerical service. At least for the year 1213 (for which we have the most complete data), the *yin* privilege was the most popular route to office, followed by the exam route (Chaffee, 1985). Clerks were hired by local officials and filled some 80 to 95% of the government posts (Huang, 1986).

<sup>101</sup> I will return in Chapter Six to the 'system of contribution' institutionalised during the Ming dynasty, through which degrees and official positions could be literally purchased for money.

period, nor was it towards every stratum of officials<sup>102</sup>. Furthermore, when it was, this only meant that systematic corruption, via status, tended to be resumed after the usual three year service upon the return of given officials to their county of origin (Wakeman, 1975: 4), or upon the migration of family member of officials from their native region to the county of official tenure after the termination of the official's state services (Tackett, 2008: 150).

The enormous body of literature on the office-system systematically shies away from any assessment of the wider political economy of political titles and positions, restricting the analysis to the examination system proper. The governing principle of the 'recruitment' and state service abided to the same principle which explains the existence of offices in the first place: not meritocratic rationality, but social power deployed in negotiations within the ruling class around the distribution of revenues extracted by extra-economic means from producers. Overall, even in periods in which the examination route was important, recommendations were the key to securing and holding of office positions, and these did not come cheaply. This crucial feature, when mentioned at all, tends to be noted as a peripheral issue not deserving of further attention. Alternatively, 'court patronage' is invoked without explaining what this implies<sup>103</sup>. This however places the debate on social mobility dear to 'gentry studies' in another light; the rise of 'new' families was based on this political economy of titles.

Moreover, counties and prefectures were 'fiscally autarkic' (Mostern, 2003) and ranked according to their uneven population<sup>104</sup>, the lucrativeness of each being determined by the

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<sup>102</sup> Albeit dating as far as the Han dynasty, this rule was, more often than not, unapplied during the Tang dynasty. During the Song era, which is supposed to be the pinnacle of this system, this rule was at the very least not applied to Wang Anshi's enterprises which were run as monopoly intendancies, or in areas like Sichuan not coveted by 'in the stream' officials.

<sup>103</sup> Ebrey (1979: 111) at least notes that during the Tang era, every official she studied was recommended through a patron. Tackett (2008b: 138) describes how Tang capital-based elites would 'co-opt the primary channels of upward mobility' through ties of marriages and kinships. For the Song period, Bossler (1998: 137-138) gives examples of gifts in 'the purchase of education and connections', itself described as 'the most common and important way in which wealth could contribute to social standing'. Twitchett (1970) and Hartwell (1971) both discuss the irregularity of personnel recruitment (i.e. only through personal recommendation or appointment) within the financial administration, respectively in the Tang and the Song period. During the Song, 'elite patronage [...] as well as plain money could serve as well as ties of kinship or marriage in securing guarantee' for exam candidacy (Chaffee, 1995: 61).

<sup>104</sup> On the hierarchy of magistrate and prefect positions during the Tang, see Herbert (1989).

surplus local agents were able to capture beyond the tax quotas set by the emperor. Consequently, the diverse political economy of sponsorship and recommendations for specific positions must have been very important<sup>105</sup>. Furthermore, there was throughout Imperial China a great number of ‘stipendiary’, ‘titular’, or ‘honorary’ offices, sometimes ‘concurrent’ titles to actual office-holdings, to which many authors only allude without explaining their crucial importance as an important cooptation tool for many emperors<sup>106</sup>.

Finally, and as a result of positions in the state apparatus being a means towards enhancing the share of extraction kept from the center, the office-state did not remain the same since its inception. Its configuration, the redefinitions of the routes leading to high positions, and shifting hands in which was put the power of appointment were at the heart of struggles within the ruling class. The role of the office-system in tax collection varied according to social property regimes.

To summarise the working of the office-system, in the ‘Six Dynasties’ period, it was used intermittently as an acknowledgment of local power by the nine ranks and as an award for the military support of the lucky horse in the unstable and shifting alliance game. It was also used as a ‘welfare’ policy in the migration of the northern elite establishing its dynasty in the South; offices were created to feed their needs at any given time. The Tang’s establishment of a relatively centralised appointment system through the ‘selection examination’ must be put in perspective in order to explain how it affected only 5-6% of office-holders. The early Tang, as every dynasty, conferred nobility and office positions to both defeated opponents and followers alike. The fiscal and geopolitical context and the struggles within the ruling class directly impacted the workings of the office-system. In the late 7<sup>th</sup> Century, the sale of ranks began, followed by the sale of appointments in the usurping, within the high court, of the selection process. Combined with the loss of territories to the Tibetan empire and to regional governors, this meant that the number of

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<sup>105</sup> Chase (1996) discusses the use of the *yin* privilege for this.

<sup>106</sup> On the plurality of office-holding, see for example Twitchett (1970) for the Tang period and Lo (1974:71) for the Song period. Herbert (1989) mentions stipendiary offices in the Tang, and Kuhn (2009: 133-134) and Kracke (1953) do so for the Song.

positions for the court to bestow drastically decreased<sup>107</sup>. From the mid-Tang, office positions such as regional governorships were literally won by war, when they were not bought, and were renewed by personal tribute to the emperor. The imperial selection process was thus outstripped by a parallel system in the provinces, as well as in the diverse commissions.

The Song attempted to further hierarchise relations within the ruling class, notably through the establishment of an additional layer of officials at the 'provincial' level, the circuit intendants. Imperial promotions and demotions of prefectures and counties also played a role in the curtailing of the power of former governors (Mostern, 2003). What the Song expansion of the 'bureaucratic elite' meant was the increase of the landlords' power in the competition for surplus extraction, both through this generalisation of tax exemption and the further opportunities provided for personal appropriation of revenues, especially from the 'localist turn' of the elite (Hartwell, 1982). Furthermore, the office structure was paralleled by the *maipu* system, put in place in certain sectors of the economy<sup>108</sup>, and the bestowal of offices to local magnates on the frontier during the phase of expansion. The office-system was thus not only far from temporally unchanging, but also far from spatially uniform.

Among proponents of the Chinese rational and meritocratic office-system, exogenous factors are put forward to explain 'anomalies' to the overall meritocratic and rational system<sup>109</sup>. This is best illustrated during the time of Tang in relation to the villain empress Wu and her 'favourites' and the rise of maleficent eunuchs accepting bribes<sup>110</sup>. This

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<sup>107</sup> Already in 737, there were nine times more ranking officials than positions available, the number of ranked individuals having increased 30% as compared to 657 (Huang, 1986: 212). The state was then in dire need of revenues (Peterson, 1979: 475), and the landlords bought local offices for legal and tax immunity (Somers, 1979: 688).

<sup>108</sup> The *maipu* system, to which I will return in the next chapter, was a form of privatisation of state power related to the management of minor tea monopoly sectors, minor tax stations, or 'local projects'.

<sup>109</sup> Some 'anomalies' are even deemed to have been implemented in order to improve administrative efficiency, as argues Liu (2012: 33-34) with the case of the Song *maipu*.

<sup>110</sup> A concubine of a former emperor who gained power in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> Century, Wu formally reigned from 690 to 705. She was infamous for her ruthlessness against rivals and for having replaced many high ranking officials. Eunuchs are commonly perceived by traditional historians as periodically usurping the emperor's powers.

ascribing of the status of anomaly to such processes, nonetheless, clashes with the widespread occurrences of sale of office in times of distress, as during mid-Tang<sup>111</sup>, or of the creation of virtual posts with no duties attached, as a solution to the increasing number of degree-holders due to the *yin* privilege during the Song (Ebrey, 1988). This bias is fundamentally based on the divorcing of political history from class relations and geopolitics. This has resulted in the obfuscation of crucial conflicts around power which shaped the wider historical trajectory of China.

The socioeconomic basis of power of the ‘gentry’ emphasises the conflicting interests between the ‘state’ and the ‘elite’, which remain hidden by the Weberian conceptualisation of this group as exclusively beholden to the office-state. The very idea that ‘office lands’ should provide for undistinguished private and public needs goes against any notion of bureaucratic rationality. The ‘rationalisation’ of the tax administration describes, at best, the historical reconfiguration of surplus distribution among the ruling class in a more hierarchical fashion. In no way did this signal a de-personalisation of the process of tax collection through a disinterested meritocracy funneling revenues to the state. All of this speaks against the belief that the center imposed an unchanged meritocratic and efficient system through the empires’ lifespan, and that the state would respond to geopolitical imperatives in a disinterested manner. Qualifying the state as bureaucratic does not exhaust the subject. The Chinese bureaucracy is an *explanandum* rather than an *explanans*.

### 2.3 Beyond ‘unified China’ vs. ‘divided China’

It would be highly problematic to presume not only that each ruling dynasty governed like its predecessors, but also that two ideal-types (division or unification) could encompass the variety of socio-spatial deployment of power in ‘China’. As stated in Chapter One, it is misleading to assume the neo-Weberian postulate that ‘pressures for war compelled similar causal mechanisms across time and space’ (Hui, 2005: 8). No law can be said to govern Chinese history: as the property of the ruler, the ‘state’ was at his whim and constant struggles around the relative shares and distribution of this object of power and its spatial

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<sup>111</sup> The sale of offices was also an important part of the financing of the southern regimes during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (Clark, 2009).



mobilisation re-wrote the state's and China's history time and time again.

There was no 'unified China' vs. 'divided China', even allowing for brief durations of disorder between dynastic shifts. The common narrative of the Chinese Empire constantly being re-built, and the smaller countries into which it had crumbled re-united, cannot explain the complex processes of state-formations and changes within China's political geography. Each of these processes involved a renegotiation of the relations between social groups, among the elites, and between them and the producers. For example, the early Tang and early Song Empires are perceived as heydays of Chinese history because these were able to pursue strategies of 'geopolitical accumulation'<sup>112</sup>, winning politically or militarily new bases of producers from whom to extract social surpluses, channelling it into means of coercion while rewarding the elites taking part in this through land grants or positions at court. When these strategies could no longer be pursued, as during the mid-Tang, elites transformed their state-vested power into private power, 'dividing' the empire first by accumulating fiscal and military power and then by a fierce intra-elite competition. By Song times, this exit option was less accessible to the elite, who instead engaged in 'local', rather than (geo)political, land grabbing, so as to shield this from state reach.

To be sure, uniting China (as uniting Europe) was an ideal shared by all rulers, as the goal of universal empire naturally entailed more social power to be wielded. Nevertheless, 'Chinese empires did not reproduce the same institutional structure century after century, they reproduced the same language and abstract ideology' (Lorge, 2005: 9-10). Only historical investigations could reveal such varying socio-political practices and institutions, where these would all take different spatial dimensions. We have no grounds to suppose

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<sup>112</sup> Political accumulation refers to the strategy, undertaken by feudal agents, entailing investment into the means of war and in state-building so as to better extract surpluses from peasants and grab lands and producers from other political contenders. According to Brenner (1997: 21), 'lords would seek to increase their income by investing in their military and political potential by constructing stronger - better armed, larger and more cohesive - political communities and feudal states, to better dominate and control the peasantry and to wage war more effectively. [...] It was imposed upon the majority of lords as a consequence of the structure of the feudal economy as a whole'. The latter implies the imbrication of the logics of domination and exploitation in a context of 'parcellised sovereignty'. Building on Brenner's works, Teschke (2002) coined the term 'geopolitical accumulation' to better emphasise the culture of war embedded in dynastic politics.

that the Yuan dynasty was a natural heir of the Han and Sui Empires, no more than we could explain Napoleon's conquests solely by Charlemagne's empire and the Capetian monarchy. Rather than this, it would be better to speak of distinct Chinese Empires in the plural and to historicise their distinct trajectories. This applies also, I shall further demonstrate, for their geopolitical relations.

### **3. Phenomenology of 'All Under Heaven'**

Overall, the fundamental contribution of this chapter is to propose a phenomenology of power of 'All Under Heaven', i.e. the changing perception of the extended world which the 'central kingdom' could claim to (loosely) govern. For the case of China, such a phenomenology of power is particularly useful to counter narratives, such as those reviewed above<sup>113</sup>, which put forward a fixed conception of Confucianism and the constraints it allegedly put on agents' behaviours. I contend that if Confucian ideas influenced the way agents experienced the world, we should nonetheless critically interrogate the imperial rhetoric. Confucian imperial discourse must be deconstructed to shed light on the conflictual claims on state power it implied. On the one hand, we cannot uncritically adopt the imperial ordering of the world in lieu of historical inquiry and reflexive thinking on what agents conveyed through their specific conceptions of the political world. On the other hand, this imperial rhetoric gives us access to and reveals the particular way in which social conflicts around power were organised. My study therefore takes up the works which have sought to see Confucianism less as a rigid dogma imposing a certain type of rationality than as a conception of the world amenable to a panoply of meanings and uses over time and amongst agents. The imperial ideology prominent at a given time was only one of them, although a crucial one for a phenomenology of power.

To fully de-ontologise the Chinese Empire's developmental path necessitates critically interrogating the vocabulary used, in order to avoid imposing a modern conception on fundamentally different entities. The language used by Imperial China's official historians was connoted by political motives, but it can also be deciphered as revealing the broader

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<sup>113</sup> Acharya (2003: 155) notably emphasises that Kang's work, like Samuel Huntington's, contains an 'essentialist and orientalist notion' of a transhistorical Confucian acceptance of hierarchy.

social context. As developed by the Confucian philosopher Mencius (372 – 289 BC) and perpetuated afterwards, the imperial ideology suggested that the Heaven bestowed a Mandate (*tianming*) upon a ruler demonstrating both the ability to control the realm (*tong*) and to govern in harmony (*zheng*). This gave way to a coherent and uninterrupted succession of dynasties (*chao*). However, this ideology also recognised at least implicitly that each reign is temporary and subject to the actual deployment of *zheng* and *tong* (rather than stemming from a divine right). Those principles governed the succession of dynasts (rather than royal blood). This vocabulary was used by official historians and emperors to legitimise the myth of a unified empire even when this notion was blatantly inaccurate from any point of view (for example during the ‘Six Dynasties’ and ‘Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms’ periods). However, it also points out to the notion of one’s rule resting on the capacity to implement a ‘Mandate’.

Governing China was always a contested and incomplete process and, as such, it cannot be encapsulated by one timeless notion, unless it is conceived in very broad terms. Control and harmony vastly differed in time, notably depending on whether this was the tendency towards ‘parcellised sovereignty’ (Anderson, 1974) or towards ‘generalised personal domination’ (Gerstenberger, 2007) which were the strongest. More crucially, control and harmony could not be achieved under pre-modern social relations: the concrete extent of *zheng* and *tong* was always re-negotiated, as parts of the conflicts around the redistribution of surplus deployed on ‘political’, ‘military’ and ‘judicial’ levels. It rested on a delicate balance of power which must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. ‘State’ (*guo*) is a misleading term if we see in it an actual embodiment of political power as uncontested, absolute and not pervaded by the logic of exploitation, and for this reason constantly re-alienated and ‘privatised’. ‘Civil war’ was consequently a threat lurking behind the façade of *guo*; the use of this notion however bears the risk of misinterpreting that such conflicts around shares of political power could never be tamed because politically constituted entitlement to revenues is what fundamentally constitutes the pre-modern ‘state’.

The imperial rhetoric on geopolitics also casts light on the complex relation between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ in pre-modern China, indeed their non-existence in such distinct

conceptions. Within Imperial China's terminology, the central Chinese 'state' (*Zhongguo* / Middle Kingdom) existed in relation to the extended Chinese world (*tianxia* / All Under Heaven). However, *Zhongguo* itself was by no means a fixed territorial concept, but an enforcement of dynastic politics. The claim to the Heavenly Mandate gave the right to impose the enlargement of *Zhongguo*, which was often resisted by other would-be Sons of Heaven. There was no clear-cut distinctions between internal and external contenders: the Mandate was historically claimed as much by 'barbarians' (e.g. the Khitan Liao and Jurchen Jin during the Song era), former regional officials (e.g. the mid-Tang military governors), and distinct 'Chinese' mini-'states' (e.g. during the 'Six Dynasties' and 'Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms' periods). Such contention around the holding of the Mandate therefore occurred beyond the obvious periods of 'dynastic transitions'. Moreover, those are better understood as instances where *Zhongguo* was reconstructed by recognising its piecemeal privatised status in delicate intra-ruling class arrangements rather than by re-establishing a natural unity.

Another illustration of the enmeshing of the inside/outside in Imperial China is the tribute-system (*chao gong ti xi*). Here again the perception of what *tianxia* encompassed was not fixed, but instead dictated by the implementation of dynastic politics. The language used to order the world and treat with other polities varied - from brother to brother, father/son to uncle/nephew relations -, expressing metaphorically the agreements achieved. But these allegorical relations were subject to change according to dynastic politics driving the rulers to geopolitically expand their tax bases. In the use of this vocabulary as in the proper bestowal of fictive kinship or marriage ties, the emperors made no internal/external distinction: these were tools to deal with 'barbarians', other Confucian polities, and rebellious ruling class groups alike. A similar argument can be made about another aspect of the tribute-system: the exchange of gifts which gave it its name. The importance of symbolic reproduction in pre-modern relations must indeed not be underestimated (Teschke, 2003: 64). In Imperial China, annual tributes were expected not only from parties to the tribute-system, but also from regional officials. Finally, in this system, 'loose-rein' regions (*jimi*) on the frontier were the perfect illustration of the blurriness of any idea of a finite and self-contained empire.

It is no coincidence that the Chinese vocabulary was so impervious to modern ideas of sovereignty and authority. As traditional accounts of Imperial China have incorporated the Confucian rhetoric of China being guided by *wen* (civil) rather than by *wu* (military)<sup>114</sup>, my reconstruction of the history of the Mandate of Heaven in its conflictual socio-spatial relations is of particular acuity. This is also a crucial anti-Eurocentric move against speaking in ‘European’ ways, rather than unveiling how the Chinese thought about themselves.

## Conclusion

The chapter has demonstrated the pitfalls faced by the reliance of IR accounts of China on the sociology of domination of Western Sinology. Realist and English School analyses are based on myths about Chinese domestic and international politics, from the perennial Chinese Empire and meritocratic office-state to the peaceful tribute-system. I have rather argued that these political and geopolitical forms have temporally varied and were incompletely institutionalised, as they were results of particular negotiation between social forces. I have enquired into the social origins of the processes which gave rise to these myths, to instead reveal the constant contention around power from which derived the non-linear and contradictory pre-modern processes of Imperial China’s state-formation. I have argued that we cannot view those two crucial features around which are organised the narratives of the Confucian uniqueness of China – its polity and political geography – as fixed and uncontested. This is because these were at the heart of the social reproduction of classes and the conflicts around the redistribution of revenues extracted from the peasantry. It simultaneously explains why we cannot passively import the concepts of the ‘state’ and the ‘international’ from the conceptions of modern European geopolitics. This chapter has thus set the basis of my method through which to understand China’s authority relations and geopolitical relations. China’s office-state and tribute-system will be further historicised in their specific incarnations as results of socio-political conflicts in the next

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<sup>114</sup> The classical example of this view is Fairbank and Kiernan (1974). There is a growing amount of works refusing this crude antinomy (e.g. Graff, 2002; Johnston, 1995; Lorge, 2005; Wang, 2011), but most of these focus on China’s military history *per se* without systematically linking it to social history.

chapter's investigations of trajectory of the Chinese Empires in the plural until the Song dynasty's collapse.

## **Chapter Five – 'China' Before the 'Barbarian Invasion': Socialising Chinese Imperial Geopolitics (618-1279)**

This chapter provides a historical reconstruction of the Chinese trajectory until the Late Imperial period, through a theoretically-informed narrative of the changing authority relations and political geography of the empire. Within the wider literature, the Tang and the Song periods are alleged to comprise diverse processes at the origins of the divergence from the Western path. These empires are indeed generally understood as encompassing important developmental phases of Chinese singularities, namely the bureaucratic office-system and tribute-system. More specifically, in traditional narratives, the Tang dynasty is deemed to have succeeded in empire consolidation and institutionalisation of the Chinese World Order, whilst the Song era is identified with the gentry's ultimate overcoming of the medieval aristocracy through its perfection of the office-system. This historical investigation allows me to interrogate the relevance of grasping the Chinese Empire as an enduring entity, of which we should trace the gradual evolution towards centralisation through such concepts. I shall contend on historical grounds with the ontologising of categories of analysis at works with the notions of the Confucian state and Chinese World Order. Revealing their socio-historical variations, and thus the contextualised rationality they spring from, is the key to contest this. If, in the theoretical chapters, I challenged the postulate of a spatial homogeneity in Europe, here I challenge the idea of a temporal homogeneity of China.

Until now, I have argued that the fundamental problems in IR works and traditional Chinese historiography are their incapacity to conceptualise, historicise, and unpack Imperial China's international institutions and behaviours, forms of authority and sovereignty, and class relation constellations. These scholars dodge the issue of social changes and variations in the deployment of political power precisely because they divorce these 'international', 'political', and 'economic' features from one another and occlude the social agency shaping them. I shall use the PM method against the understanding of China's trajectory through static concepts and structural processes, in order to transcend the narrative of the steady bureaucratisation of the peaceful Chinese state. I shall instead reveal

how conflicts around power - always uniquely expressed - temporarily crystallised class arrangements in particular socio-spatial institutions, themselves sparking further social antagonisms whose outcomes rested on the balance of class power, organisation, and struggle. The crucial contribution of the PM method to the history of Imperial China is to show how conflictual and multifaceted ways of reproduction of social classes shaped its trajectory, which cannot be theoretically derived from China's bureaucratic inclination, pacified geopolitical environment, or predilection to *wen* (civil rule). Far from being passively derived from Confucianism, through gentry domination and normative agreement among similarly inclined polities, socio-political forms were instead constantly renegotiated by social agents clashing over the extraction and distribution of surplus. Such a perspective provides for a much more dynamic conception of the trajectory of Imperial China. Moreover, instead of passively incorporating the imperial discourse into the analysis, I propose to anchor Chinese discursive categories and conceptions of the world into socio-political conflicts as they experienced them phenomenologically.

When compared to European trajectories, such a historical reconstruction of Imperial China reveals not identical, but not dissimilar, dynamics of pre-capitalist socio-political conflicts around property and power, expressed in the specific institutional configurations of the Chinese polity within its geopolitical environment over time. In this way, transcending the ontology of empire resonates within the debates on Eurocentrism, notably through its contribution to the comparison between Eurasian entities. Both the 'Rise of the West' narrative and its critique, through the California School, assert that Europe was unique in its dynamic progress brought forth by its inclusion in the international system, in contrast with an enduring Chinese universal empire evolving in what amounts to a geopolitical vacuum. Grounding Chinese political and spatial categories in conflicts around power instead reveals the discontinuities in the constitution of the state and its political geography, leading me to question the very idea that we can talk of the same empire throughout China's history. On the one hand, this profoundly upsets the conventional narrative on China as static or as the mirror image of Europe, conceived as the exclusive source of development. On the other hand, such a comparison retracing the pre-modern parallels (whilst acknowledging their specificities) between Imperial China and early modern Continental Europe rules out



the widespread thesis that Europe possessed exclusive and pan-continental characteristics inevitably leading it towards modernity.

The specific period covered by this chapter comprises the temporal span from the Tang dynasty (618-907) to the Song dynasty (960-1279), in addition to brief enquiries into the chaotic period between the building of the empire by the Qin dynasty and the end of the 'Six Dynasties' period. This periodisation from the Tang to the Song is chosen, on the one hand, because this represents the more stable dynasties prior to the Late Imperial period. The challenge is thus greater in proving my argument that political geography and authority relations were not as settled as the dominant Sinology and IR paradigms suggest. On the other hand, these literatures understand the Tang and Song reigns as the culmination of processes started by the initial building of the universal empire. A detour through the 'divided' medieval period is therefore also needed.

Geographically, the empire waxed and waned during this long period: its scale varied enormously, as did the poroseness of its frontiers – and this, between and within dynastic reigns. The definition of its political boundaries also depends on how integration within the empire is defined, since loose administration of regions distant from the capitals characterised most reigns. What *Zhongguo* (Middle Kingdom) referred to was eminently unstable, as the basis for this 'geographic description, indicating the country or countries occupying the central portions of the known world' (Holcombe, 2004: 749) drastically changed over time. At its nadir, the Qin dynasty was bordered by the Liao River, the Yellow River, the Sichuan basin, and the Guangdong and Guangxi regions. At the moment of its furthest expansion under the Tang in the early 8<sup>th</sup> Century, the Chinese Empire's reach was extended to Annam (Vietnam), Southern Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, and modern-day Tadjikistan. This was however not a linear progression in geographical reach, as, for most of the time during the period studied, this territory was ruled by different political entities, to which are attributed anachronistically the characteristics of 'Chinese' and 'non-Chinese', legitimising them, or not, as the holder of the Mandate of Heaven in the dynastic successions. Only from the North Song do we see half the population inhabiting what is often understood as the core of 'China' (Middle and Lower Yangzi and the Southeast)

(Hartwell, 1992: 385). Such variations in demographical patterns and nominal and actual (fiscal) territorial reach must be explained by conjoined enquiries in social history and political geography.

Section One proceeds to provide a historical reconstruction of the trajectory of imperial China from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, informed by the tradition of PM. The purpose of this counter-narrative is to show the internally fractured and ever-changing constellation of the social and geopolitical relations of 'Empire', which the standard conceptual distinction between imperial unification and division cannot capture. Rendering this history as a contested process, in line with PM, enables us to trace the rich history of the Chinese trajectory without reducing it to pre-conceived models or theories. The second purpose is to secure our contention that the 'Chinese case', in comparative perspective, does not constitute an anomaly or a divergence from the 'European Case', but one specific product of the agential construction of a 'world' – transcending the ontology of empire.

Section Two draws out the implications of this historical analysis by returning to the comparative question – the similarity or difference between medieval/early modern Europe and Imperial China – that pervades the wider debate on the 'Great Divergence'. This enquiry into Chinese history from the Sui to the South Song, paralleled by the analysis of the adequacy of the notions of office-state, empire, and tribute-system, builds up in comparing the long-term European and Chinese trajectories and by stressing their specific pre-modern characteristics. This is therefore also an occasion to test Wong's 'reciprocal comparison' on the trajectories of Europe and China. I shall ultimately demonstrate that only a theorisation seeking to understand the complexity of Chinese domestic and foreign relations as variegated strategies grounded in changing social regimes can successfully achieve a non-Eurocentric comparison of pre-modern Eurasia's diversity.

### **1. Reconstructing Imperial China's history**

This section provides an alternative narrative to the history of Imperial China's major dynasties, and their respective traditional reputations as the period of medieval aristocracy (the 'Six Dynasties'), of cultural reunification (the Tang), of an anarchic interlude (the 'Five

Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms'), and of the literati dominance (the Song). Despite the richness of 'sectorial' histories on this period (whether in the forms of local, specific lineage's, military, economic, or certain dynastic<sup>115</sup> history), macro-analysis has mostly been driven by political history whose focus on leaders results in voluntaristic accounts (e.g. *Cambridge History of China* volumes; Mote, 1998) or by structuralist ideal-typification, often driven by a Confucian uniqueness (e.g. Balazs, 1964; Fairbank and Goldman, 2006; Weber, 1951). In a nutshell, the traditional account of the Chinese trajectory during this period retraces the decline of the aristocracy to the benefit of the gradual rise of imperial power in the form of the office-state, this overall narrative albeit being punctuated by dynastic cycles. The critical interrogation of such an assumption of a linear and cumulative development (from the Qin to the Song) toward the realisation of the ideal of the centralised bureaucratic state will guide this section. Demonstrating how Chinese political authority relations and geography were as agentially-built and conflict-ridden, and therefore whose trajectory was as open-ended as Europe's, thus strongly departs from orthodox narratives' enduring and single empire. It has tremendous consequences for avoiding blockage-like explanations of China's long-term trajectory, anchored in its naturalised, allegedly intrinsic, immutable, and unique institutions.

A note on sources is however needed before beginning this historical narrative. A fair charge could be levelled against the relative lack of engagement with peasant agency in this first part of my reconstruction of Imperial China's history. PM has indeed been accused of excessively focussing on intra-ruling class relations, and insufficiently on the agency of the productive class (e.g Callinicos, 1999; Heller, 2011). This case study should also compel more representation of such struggles on empirical grounds, as Imperial China witnessed an impressive number of rebellions.

The lack of dependable sources is the main reason for the absence of systematic assessment of the impact of peasant revolts on the course of the Chinese Empire during the 618-1279 timeframe. Lists of uprisings are certainly available, but the extent to which these were

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<sup>115</sup> Most of them however study a specific dynasty as the concatenation of Imperial China's enduring features (e.g. Adshead, 2004; Huang, 1974b; Khun, 2009).

instances of peasant agency vs. banditry or contention for power by members of the ruling class is open to debate<sup>116</sup>. Because of the lack of primary material, no causal relation between peasant uprisings and the transformations of the Chinese polity and socio-economic relations can be convincingly posited<sup>117</sup>. Much crucial data, as with land/man ratio, often result from controversial extrapolations from local or official data. No official records were kept during periods in which no 'unified' Chinese Empire existed (e.g. the 'Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms' period). In turbulent periods, these records are particularly unreliable (e.g. the late Tang era). Variations between different extrapolations about population changes<sup>118</sup> are enormous (Deng, 2004). To my knowledge, there is no equivalent, for the dynasties prior to the Ming, to the works of demographic historians on eco-demographical crises affecting Europe in the second millennium<sup>119</sup>. Furthermore, no tenancy contracts survived from the period covered here, except from one, moreover exceptional, region in Central Asia (Twitchett, 1966). It is thus impossible to ascertain changes in the security of tenure or other possible indicators of peasants' victories. From what can be inferred from broader sources, it seems that there were important variations between regions in terms of landlord-peasant relations and that a diversity of practices endured (bondage to the land or the landlord, tenancy, fixed rent, sharecropping, etc.)<sup>120</sup>. The data begins to become clearer for the Song era, but suffices mostly during the Ming and Qing periods alone; so this is an issue specific to this chapter.

Overall, peasant struggles and victories for this period seem to have been localised or regional in character, without parallels with the pan-European changes of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century or the 17<sup>th</sup> Century peasant victory in Ming China. Peasant resistance most probably impacted strongly within the areas in which these occurred, but the endeavour of retracing

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<sup>116</sup> For example, see Deng (1999). His list confuses every kind of mass rebellion in one category according to the participation of peasants rather than taking into account the origins and objectives of revolts.

<sup>117</sup> Scholars asserting such causal relations, for example between war, dynastic collapse, land/man ratio, and peasant uprisings (Chu and Lee, 1994; Usher, 1989) rely on theoretical models alone.

<sup>118</sup> The leading works on population data are Chao (1986), Maddison (1998), McEvedy and Jones (1978), and foremost, in Chinese, Zhao and Xie (1984).

<sup>119</sup> Most of the literature on Imperial China's demography is centered on either intra-regional migration (e.g. Hartwell, 1982; Skinner, 1977) or on the difference or similarity of Chinese family patterns to those of the West (e.g. Zhao, 1997).

<sup>120</sup> This issue shall be addressed in the historical reconstruction of the Song period.

their micro-politics is beyond the scope of the chapter. However, each time the sources are available, the impact of peasant struggles is portrayed, for example, at moments of turning points in the survival of the Chinese Empire (e.g. during the late Tang or Song periods) or as differentiating the situation of particular regions. Peasants' historical imprint is nonetheless generally negatively assessed, for example through their flight or non-registering strategies.

### 1.1 From the dawn of the 'universal empire' to the 'Six Dynasties' period

The history of the Chinese Empire conventionally has its starting point in the unification of the feudal principalities by what was later known as the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC). This marked the end of the Warring States period (453-221 BC) and, more generally, the first 'multi-state system' (Hui, 2005) which also comprises the Spring and Autumn period (770-453 BC). The Qin's short-lived reign rapidly dissolved back into regional kingdoms, to be followed by the Han dynasty period (206 BC – 220 AD), perceived as the pursuit of a 'universal empire'. This is better understood as a period of political accumulation rather than a stable 'state' presiding over a pacified territory reaching even to Central Asia: the Han period was generally marked by internecine wars and constant shifting of political geography. This period was crucially marked by the division, then reunification of the empire under the Eastern, or Later Han (25-220) after seventeen years of war. Rebellions, endemic at least from 184 onward, finally ended in the breakdown of the empire, ushering in the Three Kingdoms period (220-265/280), comprised of the Wu, Wei, and Shu states. This era is followed by the 'Six Dynasties' period, including the Jin dynasty era and the Southern and Northern Dynasties period.

The imperial ideology presents this period as an uninterrupted succession of dynasties in an undivided realm. It is however difficult to argue that there was a unified Chinese Empire from the Han to the Sui. In the literature, the debates on this 'age of aristocracy' revolve around whether clans controlled the state or whether it controlled them. The concept of 'aristocratic rule', first argued for by an important Japanese scholar associated with the Tokyo school, presents the ruler as firstly '*primus inter pares*'. This 'Naito's hypothesis' is

certainly far from convincing<sup>121</sup>, especially for accounting for the many variations occurring during this period. The subsequent literature on the great clans has been faced with the irresolvable nature of many historiographical issues of this period, notably the medieval origins and longevity of the ‘great clans’ until the Song<sup>122</sup>.

As explained in Chapter Four, the problem with a large part of this later literature deriving from ‘gentry studies’ is that the notions of ‘aristocracy’, ‘great families of officials’, or ‘oligarchy’ are not systematically linked within an enquiry into their bases of social power within specific social relations. Given the literature’s quasi exclusive focus on the imperial state, the idea of great clans or aristocracy is foremost associated with representation in official positions and with descent. I will rather more broadly ask whether there were important private powers challenging the ruling house, be there rising and falling (both in prestige and literally), as well as social relations favouring the persistence of a kind of ‘parcellisation of sovereignty’. I will also ask why official positions were offered, beyond the fact that identified individuals detained aristocratic surnames. I argue that such positions were awarded for personal services, which included support of the dynasty in succession strife, and that such ‘offices’ did not carry important bureaucratic power. I propose that the rise and fall of great houses followed from the fact that dynasties quickly succeeded one another in a climate of enduring wars and shifting alliances. I suggest that this focus on the ranking apparatus obscures at times more important players and ways of cooptation (such as the princely powers in the Southern Dynasties or ‘nomadic’ distinctions in the north). Overall, I will show that the ‘Six Dynasties’ period was far from homogeneous or abiding to a linear narrative. This will also serve to subsequently demonstrate that these pre-modern characteristics of ‘divided China’, in terms of authority relations and political geography, were still operating in the ‘reunified’ and ‘imperial’

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<sup>121</sup> This thesis is accessible in English in Naito (1962) and through Miyakawa (1955). The thesis that the state was the ‘instrument of the aristocratic class’ has not survived in light of more recent research. There are, indeed, doubts about such a high degree of independent military and landed power, and thus also the possibility of long term reproduction of the ‘aristocracy’ (Dien, 1991; Grafflin, 1990).

<sup>122</sup> The lack of sources explains this. Claims to common descent were also probably not always veracious, but utilised to secure legitimacy (Holmgren, 1981). Some scholars deem as premature to claim their Medieval China affiliation, arguing that only a few important Tang families can be traced back to the Han (Grafflin, 1991). Clans are to be distinguished from Late Imperial China’s lineages, involving the ‘pooling of resources’.

period which followed.

The notion of variants of ‘military dynasticism’ (Lewis, 2009a) is more attuned to the fluctuations of authority relations and political geography as sources of power for the period of the ‘Six Dynasties’. Ebrey (1979) demonstrates how many old families disappeared during this period, when the diversity of their resources was largely canalised in their collaboration with the court, with many of these families fading away with frequent coups. However, this does not mean a premature stable centralisation of power, as it was the names that changed rather than the processes by which emperors needed to be backed up by powerful groups to secure their rule and for this, re-privatising authority in diverse fashions. The ‘state’ was neither bureaucratic nor impersonal nor even that important an institution *per se* if devoid of the power the ruler brought with him. To summarise, the entire period was ridden by attempts (and at times and in different parts of the empire, successes) to establish independent polities by a number of social forces possessing private armies and dependents, from generals and leading local families to princes. These competed over the producing class composed of dependants (coming from either populations captured in war, bankrupted fugitives illegally escaping state tax and *corvée*, or ‘bounded retainers’, i.e. dependants working the land of their master while not fighting for him) and of formally free peasants in registered households tilling state lands. Due to the high level of feuds, peasant rebellions occurred massively to fight conscription (Crowell, 1983). Overall, violence was never centrally monopolised. Local and provincial powers always controlled more troops than the center, with ‘sub-national’ troops being composed mostly of ‘bounded retainers’.

#### 1.1.1 From the Three Kingdoms to the Western Jin dynasty

The Three Kingdoms social regimes were based on ruling houses controlling hereditary military and agricultural colonies<sup>123</sup>. Over time, land and people were awarded to militarised followers as private property, whether through the Northern dismantling of colonies given as private properties to leading families or the Southern granting of lands as

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<sup>123</sup> In the North, these ‘state’-owned estates were neighbours to armed local magnates’ lands, whereas in the South such large estates were the unique form of land property.

fiefs to generals who had been opening new fields and recruiting native people in these colonies. Although these elites owed their titles to the ruling houses, they had an independent and hereditary economic and military basis. If high office positions were coveted, acquired through the court's recommendation and monopolised by the 'great families' competing for this source of power, these were not at first the primary source of power. The ruling houses continuously tried to curb the local powers and increase their share of surplus by strengthening household registration, through which the states attempted to prevent the increase of the number of dependants of tax-exempted magnates, resisting the state's arrogation of the right to expand. The awarding of 'private clients' was to remain the emperor's prerogative, but this was not easily managed (Tang, 1991).

Tensions between growing local powers and the ruling houses led to the landed family of the former Wei general, Cao Cao, establishing the short-lived (Western) Jin dynasty by conquering the Shu polity in 263, and thereafter the polity of Wu in 280. The imperial center however proved unable in the long run to provide sufficient occasions for the local elite to increase their social power. Since the Jin was wary of this elite, it managed to curb their independent powers by putting it in even more powerful hands, privatising the power at a provincial princely level. The Jin imperial power thus enfeoffed its relatives in fifty-seven imperial princedoms according to the size of their armies. After the initial conquest, this situation led to war among the princes and against the emperor, notably during the War of Eight Princes (291-306; Dreyer, 2009). In 311, nomads conquered North China, and from that point onward, the history of the period is geographically divided between the rival Southern and Northern dynasties<sup>124</sup>.

### 1.1.2 The Southern Dynasties

The period began with the establishment of the (Eastern) Jin dynasty in the South from 317, following their flight from the nomads. The imperial center was still struggling for power with the great families, facing resistance over its policy of restricting the enlarging of

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<sup>124</sup> The actual location of the North/South frontier however varied during the period.



southern local estates<sup>125</sup>. The state apparatus at that time can be characterised as ‘a welfare system for the aristocratic refugees’ (Graffin, 1991: 60): land and court positions were granted to the northern *émigrés*, a practice grafted to the more usual practice of conferring office as a recognition of local power<sup>126</sup>. From the 420s onward, the Jin were replaced by four succeeding different dynasties. A pattern of placing imperial princes into positions of power in provinces occurred (similar to such attempts in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> Century). This was aimed to reduce the threat of the local magnates’ participation in *coups d’état* and the clashes of local, provincial, and imperial forces characteristic of the Western and Eastern Jin eras<sup>127</sup>. The imperial power relatively succeeded in curbing the influence of the great local families at court, on whose armies the center did not depend anymore. The *émigré* families, whose position was insecure (as it was due mainly to their ties to the court), also disappeared with the coming to power of new military leaders. Other groups like regional warlords, however, joined the struggles among provincial and imperial forces during this period. Conflicts over jurisdictions were recurrent and imperial princes had the power to bind local forces through personal loyalty via patronage relations for, at most, a lifetime. Wars among princes, in competition for patronage networks and territories, cascaded through their militarised clients (Chittick, 2010). The very idea of a center declined over time: twenty-six rulers, mere puppets of the private forces detaining temporarily more power, succeeded one another from 420 to 589, of which thirteen were killed and four deposed (Dien, 1991: 18).

### 1.1.3 The Northern Dynasties

In the north, after the 311 war leading to the Western Jin's loss of its territories, power was much more dispersed, decentralised, and unstable. Nomads governed the divided North in Sixteen Kingdoms under a loose tribal confederation, forcibly moving the conquered population to their respective capitals and fighting or co-opting populations established within local forts. These Northern dynasties were characterised by a far less stable

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<sup>125</sup> This even resulted in a short taking over of the dynasty by one such magnate from 322 to 324.

<sup>126</sup> The ruling house also had to provide high offices to local southern families in exchange for their military support, as the northern *émigrés*’ army was unable to repel the attack from the North (Dien, 1991: 17-18).

<sup>127</sup> There was a relative demilitarisation of the southern local families over the subsequent dynasties: 70-94% of this power was held locally during the Eastern Jin, whereas it declined rapidly after 420 during the post-Jin Southern Dynasties to a proportion as low as 17% (Mao, 1991: 94).

succession of rule than in the South. The Northern Wei (386-535) dynasty broke this pattern and proceeded to 'Sinicise' its rule, transforming its tribal leaders into a hereditary military class with attributed lands from which to derive income.<sup>128</sup> The Wei pursued the conquest of the North whilst redistributing its fruits, which was an essential component of the securing of this regime (Eisenberg, 1997)<sup>129</sup>. Over time, it co-opted native magnates towards sharing state privileges while intermarriage also became frequent. At first, these preeminent families had retained their local bases (more important and militarised than in the south).<sup>130</sup> Their independent power had, however, eroded over time under the combined pressure of the assault on private landholdings (through the equal-field system) and on their military power during their conquest by the Sui (Ebrey, 1979: 82-83; Lewis, 2009a: 127-135).

In 485, the Northern Wei promulgated the 'equal-field system' that the early Tang would also borrow. This northern practice served to relocate people and fill up the reservoir of taxation in areas that the dynasty could control. Under this policy, each household of one male could receive a given amount of land and tools on 'state farms' (in exchange of tax and *corvée*) and could thus be 'free' from any feudal protection. Large estates nonetheless persisted, despite the imperial ascribing of quotas of land allowed to be possessed<sup>131</sup>. This relative increase of state-lands allowed the new military system to be put in place. Such 'divisional militia' of soldiers conscripted to work on military smallholdings later proved

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<sup>128</sup> 'Imperial retirement' was part of the process of 'Sinicisation' aimed at stabilising the line of succession in accordance with the principle of primogeniture, in contrast to that of the nomadic agnatic succession politics (Eisenberg, 1991). For a nuanced position of the Sinicisation of the Toba Wei in the definition of status and their relation to office-holding, see Dien (1976).

<sup>129</sup> In the 420s, North China was thus unified, its territory further expanded in the 430s and 460s.

<sup>130</sup> Most peasants were then tenants under the control and 'protection' of local families, 'harboured' from Jin state tax, owing service and rent only to their lords. However, many peasants fled from the constant warfare.

<sup>131</sup> This right to leasehold was granted for a lifetime, but it tended to morph into private ownership; such a system was also designed for the settling of the nomad peoples of the Wei dynasty (Deng, 1999: 78). The local families were asked to let go of one tenth of their dependant tenants in this renewed, but overall unsuccessful, attempt to increase state tax funds by a cultivation of abandoned lands and an incorporation, into the state's tax system, of the peasants appropriated over time by local landlords (Tang, 1991: 124-127). This new policy aimed to restrict to officials the right to have tenants, each being attributed a set number of tenant households (Mao, 1991), but it was a 'paper revolution' as local magnates could not be easily dislodged as these held their local official positions hereditarily (Elvin, 1973: 50). However, the large landholding families were faced with a stoppage in the inflow of lands and peasants under their orbit of power, a development which impacted negatively on them in the long run (Ebrey, 1979: 83).

crucial due to the subsequent loss of the military backbone of the dynasty during the early 6<sup>th</sup> Century tribesmen revolts. Upon these frontier revolts led by the Mongolian nobility of the Northern Wei, this political regime was partitioned into two polities in the East and the West in 535. The latter was succeeded by the Northern Zhou (557-581), absorbing in 577 the Eastern Wei/Northern Qi.

### 1.2 The Sui-Tang period and its aftermaths

In traditional narratives, the Sui era of rule is but a prelude to the Tang, the ‘Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdom’ period of rule, an interlude before the Song reunification. The Tang dynasty is often identified as the heyday of the Chinese empire (Adshead, 2004). If the concept of written imperial examination is dated as far as the Han dynasty, it has acquired a growing significance during the Sui, Tang, and Song eras and this system of granting degrees is seen as occupying an important place in the efficiency of the civil service system. The Sui-Tang period is thus perceived as characterising the end of the aristocratic rule which persisted throughout the ‘Six Dynasties’ era, which would now be replaced by a centralised bureaucratic administrative form of rule, to be further perfected by the Song.

But did this ‘return to empire’ and ‘reunification’ signify that the presumptions of the inside/outside distinction and bureaucratic centralisation can be used to understand China’s history from the Tang Empire onwards? Overall, I argue that the characteristics which precluded this during the age of ‘military dynasticism’ were still present in the Sui-Tang era. My historical reconstruction of agential and relational conflicts over land and people indeed demonstrates that political geography and state power were still primary objects of contention in these struggles. More specifically, I will contend with the prevalent dynastic division of the period. To follow transformations in social relations rather than the ‘unification vs. division’ narrative, the Tang era has to be separated into two periods which are divided by the changes catalysed by the halt in geopolitical accumulation, epitomised after the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763)<sup>132</sup>. The early Tang regime is reminiscent of the Sui reign. Following the mid-8<sup>th</sup> Century, the Tang had only nominally an empire. The division

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<sup>132</sup> This military governor in a northern province expanded his power and even gained control over the capital before being defeated by the Tang dynasty with the help of Uighur troops.

of the empire under the rule of military governors formed a specific form of authority relations. Crucially, it is during the period of ‘Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms’ that we see the establishment of social relations enabling the Song office-state. Rather than being a conscious choice of the Song to consolidate a civil bureaucracy along the lines of preceding attempts dating back to the building of the ‘universal empire’, this instance of state formation originated in the period of ‘divided China’. This was a two century-long protracted process, based on the model of the military regional governors of the late Tang.

However, I do not merely propose, through this, a re-periodisation of China history. This is rather a re-theorisation of elite power, of what this means to be able to ensure the ‘loyalty’ of followers and to build different forms of empires. These are understood here as conflictual processes built on diverse ways of redistributing revenues, rather than as projects of founders or a gradual process of centralisation, as the literature usually portrays<sup>133</sup>. This orthodox perspective on the Chinese ‘state’, as an intrinsic and cumulatively developing feature of the empire, enables simultaneously the unproblematised use of the category of ‘China’ and the mobilisation of its enduring form of polity as the source of its ‘blockage’. Both the origins of the office-state and its nature under the Song rather further confirm that the ‘state’ was firstly a contested (and thus eminently changing) instance of institutionalisation of differentiated rights to gain access to surpluses.

### 1.2.1 The Sui

Emerging from a powerful family which had participated in the founding of the Northern Zhou, the Sui dynasty took over the relatively united North in 581, and then conquered the South, and later on Annam in 602, thereby resuming more glorious days for the empire until 618. During its short reign, the Sui dynasty rulers nonetheless attempted to centralise the system they inherited, whilst continuing with such northern policies as the equal-field system (Twitchett, 1979). The Sui tried to reverse the previous tendency of privatising and

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<sup>133</sup> The range of such studies goes from Weber (1959: 53-83) to Mote (1999: 92-118). On the Song as the beginning of ‘bureaucratic despotism’ characteristic of Late Imperial China’s history, see Naito (1983) and Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig (1965). The *Cambridge History of China* is a classic example of a founders-centered perspective on the Song bureaucratic innovation (Twitchett and Smith, 2009).

subdividing proliferating offices, which was sustained by the surcharging of the local population and the bribing of the imperial government and had led to the loss of the ruling house's tax base. The Sui therefore instituted the redistribution of land to officials for mixed private/public expenses and the new 'rule of avoidance'<sup>134</sup>, whilst re-appropriating the right to appointment.

All this rested on the Sui's ability to redistribute the land they captured through their conquests. Yet, even lower officials (so with less means for this than high officials) pursued parallel strategies towards wealth and land accumulation. Moreover, the equal-field system's application was limited. High quotas of land for the nobility ran parallel to this system. This system itself was a gold mine for the officials in charge. Peasants kept facing and fleeing enormous taxes and tax debts, as land allocation never reached the official quota. Land-grabbing also persisted under the right to open new lands. Later unsuccessful imperialist policies contributed to the dynasty's fall: the Sui failed to conquer the Turks and Koguryo (northern Korea), while they were, furthermore, assailed by raids from the Khitans located in Manchuria. Upon the death of the emperor, combined with internal revolts and a depleted treasury strained by war, the Sui dynasty was rapidly followed by the Tang dynasty. A tri-partite internecine war divided along regional lines led to the victory of the North-Western contenders, who founded the Tang dynasty.

The Tang dynasty originated as hereditary nobility controlling the Shanxi region, with conjoined military and civil official positions under the Sui ruling house. Such governors, who received sources of income and drafted pools of soldiers in addition to their private power, were in a position to 'rebel' if dissatisfied with the diminution of imperial largesse. This illustrates that the cooptation of the forces within the empire was congenitally unstable and relied on the ability of the center to pursue compensation for 'loyalty'. Even if the Tang may have succeeded in maintaining such a balance for a longer period, they were not able to resolve the contradictions inherent to this mechanism of rule.

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<sup>134</sup> This policy, not uniformly applied, referred to the short tenure of office outside the official's native area, usually for three years.

### 1.2.2 The early Tang

The Tang ruling house extended the Sui's agricultural colonies under the equal-field system<sup>135</sup>, bringing more taxable land under cultivation and giving access to peasants' *corvée* labour. As usual, the Tang began their rule by granting of titles, prefectures, and land to surrendered rebels or followers, a process which gave rise to a 'swollen nobility',<sup>136</sup>. It also perpetuated 'loyalty' through its military system, based on the Northern Dynasties' practice of an elite 'regimental army' leading imperial conscripted farmers-soldiers (Lewis, 2009, 44-45). Elite families traditionally had a son as military officer, which granted him land and fiscal exemptions. Distinctions on the battlefield led to the coveted certificates of appointment, an opportunity to buy rank (Zhang, 2007). This system led the Tang to win Tolos and Uighur territories (in 646) and the former Korean kingdoms of Koguryo and Paekche, following the war fought in collaboration with Silla (645-668). A system of 'pacification colonies' governed these territories, whilst the Tang's administration of conquered tribes took various forms<sup>137</sup>. The 'stability' of the first century of the empire thus relied on the redistribution of the territory of the initial conquests and the capacity to make such a system endure.

This overall arrangement did not last long; the Tang enjoyed a much shorter reign than is generally acknowledged. In this, they resembled mostly the Sui, but this is also reminiscent of the previous pattern of medieval China. As with previous dynasties, the Tang were successful as long as they could pursue expansion, as this was the primary means to redistribute surplus and reward the elite – in other words, the basis of the regime. However, this came to a halt from the late 7<sup>th</sup> Century. A shortage of land was increasingly felt: by 730, the land allocated to peasants under the equal-field system was reduced by 50% in

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<sup>135</sup> Here again, the actual reach of the equal-field system must not be overestimated: one decade after the conquest, one third of the total Sui population was still not registered. No sources confirmed that it had ever been implemented in the South even under the Tang (Twitchett, 1969: 39). See also Xiong (1999).

<sup>136</sup> Prefectures and counties were created for this new nobility, to the extent that this doubled the number of such divisions as compared to the Sui era (Wechsler, 1979: 205).

<sup>137</sup> Tribes were added to original prefectures or administered by the nearest military commanders. The administration could also be granted, in exchange of annual tribute, to tribal leaders with blood links to the emperor (many of which were fictitious due to marriage or bestowal of kinship). On the issue of bestowal of kinship, see von Glahn (1987) regarding the situation on the Sichuan's frontiers, and Wang (2011), for its central importance during the Five Dynasties era.

80% of the districts (Chao, 1986: 91). The empire's need of revenues led to sales of offices and noble titles becoming common practice again. A panoply of 'extra-bureaucratic special commissioners' were thus created, from regional military governors to head of monopolies – mainly salt and iron – and diverse *ad hoc* commissions on fiscal policy, infrastructure, and household registration.

Military deployment patterns thus began to change, from rewarding expeditions to border defence. The ruling house was moreover less able to keep its commitment of awarding 'merit land'. This signalled the retreat of the ruling elite from those 'state services'. The Tang would now come to face constant threats from diverse steppe 'nomads' and polities<sup>138</sup>, particularly by the Tibetan Empire<sup>139</sup>, but also by the Eastern and Western Turks, and Khitans. Such major raids on the borders led to the establishment of frontier military governors (Cohen, 2000: 77-78). This system of provincial governors, being concurrently responsible for the prefectures and the military colonies,<sup>140</sup> came to replace the previous military system; this signalled the transfer of the formerly imperially-detained military might to commands on the frontiers.

These regional military governors rose to power from the An Lushan Rebellions onward, achieving practical independence, gaining fiscal privileges, appointment power, and hereditary offices with long tenure. To face the rebellion, the imperial government institutionalised, within the entire empire, its frontier policies. The interior provinces were encouraged to establish agricultural and military colonies and to take over those colonies belonging to the state (Twitchett, 1959: 181-191). If this move proved successful in

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<sup>138</sup> The adjective 'nomad' is used here in accordance with the terminology in the literature. This does not imply an absence of political organisation or settled population. There are nonetheless differences in socio-political organisation between, on the one hand, loosely knit tribes on Chinese borders and, on the other hand, durable polities, such as the Jurchen Jin, the Tangut Xi Xia, the Khitan Liao, the Mongols, and diverse Turkic-type state formations. Overviews of the trajectories of these polities and their relations with the Chinese Empires can be found in Franke and Twitchett (1994) and Mote (1999).

<sup>139</sup> The Tang victories over the Western Turks gave them access to the lucrative trade routes in Central Asia, but these lands remained highly contested. The Chinese often had to make concessions to the Tibetan Empire, through inter-marriage and tribute. The Tibetans captured the Central Asian part of the Tang Empire from 670 to 692. They always contested it afterwards, finally regaining it in 756.

<sup>140</sup> Such colonies were based on the recruitment of poor and dispossessed peasants. They were given salaries, were exempted from tax and *corvée* duty, and were being granted land in frontier areas, in which they settled permanently (Twitchett, 1959).

retaking the capital from the Northern rebels, this, crucially, ‘gave institutional permanence to the rebellion’ (Lewis, 2009b). Following the imperial strategy to crush the rebellions, military power was held provincially and provincial loyalty could only be temporarily bought, as the governors succeeded in building private power, which led to intra-ruling class military competition<sup>141</sup>. Provincial governors came into power through a variety of routes, from co-optation of former rebels to court governor appointments, and the relation between these and the center varied geographically and temporally throughout the second half of the dynasty (Wang, 1963). Large parts of the empire were re-privatised to whoever could afford to claim a piece of it, by force or by purchase of offices; in many cases, imperial appointees were turned down by provincial military display.

From then on, the Tang had to mostly rely on foreign troops (Rossabi, 1983). By losing state lands, the Tang lost their source of soldiers, but also the source of revenues. The equal-field system was no longer workable, due to the provincial gain in autonomy and the destruction and obsolescence of tax records, all in a context of war-induced depopulation and southwards migration<sup>142</sup>. This signalled the end of the (relative) administrative uniformity in revenue collection and codes of law (Twitchett 1979: 18-19). In such a context, the two-tax system<sup>143</sup> was instated in 780, as an acknowledgment of prevalent practices. Crucially, this system was to be implemented by negotiation of local tax quotas upon an initial assessment; the provinces then accepted to give this quota of tax to the center, but were autonomous on the issue of how to raise these. Changes in fiscal policy were unevenly implemented from the start. The autonomous provinces no longer paid taxes through the channels of the bureaucratic tax system, but gave tribute directly to the

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<sup>141</sup> For example, when the Tibetans temporarily took over the capital in 763, no province responded to the emperor’s demand for help. When the emperor commanded nine provinces to march on a recalcitrant province in 775, these grabbed some parts of its territory but abandoned the campaign afterwards (Peterson, 1979). The diversity and evolution of the relations between the imperial center and the provinces were furthermore influenced by the tensions with other provinces and with foreign threats (Graff, 2008).

<sup>142</sup> Despite this, the North remained the most important area for the Tang during its rule. The provinces of Ho-Pei and Ho-nan contained 25 to 30% of the population of the empire at the time of the Rebellion; the following loss of these provinces had important financial repercussions for the Tang (Peterson, 1979: 486). A subsequent demographic explosion began in the south between 742 and 1200 (Hartwell, 1982).

<sup>143</sup> Its name refers to the taxation newly occurring twice a year (on summer and fall harvests). This new system theoretically abolished additional levies. From a fixed tax and service labour on each male household (excepting clergy, officials, and nobles), tax quotas were now to be set according to wealth and cultivated land; it was thus also aimed at merchants.



emperor. Without court appointees to supervise the process and with governors in control of private armies to add into the mix during political negotiations with the court, the imperial revenues dried out<sup>144</sup>.

The government kept fiscal control, in 807, only on eight out of forty provinces, all set in the Yangzi (Peterson, 1979: 510). Even in such 'loyal' provinces, common practices now included big landlords bribing the authorities for 'tax-shelter', lists of registered households being kept away from imperial accounts, and the illegal levelling of additional taxes and levies. Due to the emperor's constant need of revenues to wage war against its provinces, a tax on the salt monopoly (this revenue arising from the more secure southern part of the empire) was established (Adshead, 2004: 50); soon followed taxes on tea and wine<sup>145</sup>. For the same reason, the imperial tax burden on the peasantry, now relying solely on the Yangzi region, dramatically increased<sup>146</sup>. Due to its incapacity to regulate the provinces and enforce the equal-field system, the ruling house was forced to recognise the owners' right of disposal of their land, and this period witnessed the rise of great estates and increasing tenancy.

The post-An Lushan period was thus fraught with further provincial upheavals, popular tax revolts, mutinies, and banditry. At times (as in 806 and 814-819), some provinces decided to formally reintegrate the Tang empire, and the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century saw some relative imperial control reasserted. Overall, however, we see a pattern in which the varied balance of power between the imperial center and individual provinces, as well as among the latter, determined the distribution of revenues. An additional blow came from the south where, from 858 onward, alliances between landowners and merchants who had bought military positions defied the government and brought the wave of 'regional militarization'

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<sup>144</sup> The implicit gain of power of appointment by the less loyal provinces (mostly located in the north-east) was particularly important due to the mode of distribution of revenues: from the prefecture to the province where each kept from taxes what was needed to cover its 'public' expenses/private revenues, and with only the remaining amount going to the court.

<sup>145</sup> The monopoly commissioners however acquired a new autonomy in fiscal matters and right to self-appointment, and those were titles concurrent to governors of such provinces (Wright, 1979: 53-55).

<sup>146</sup> Moreover, the new cash-assessed tax system was hit by deflation, and the apportionment policy constrained the village to pay the tax of the numerous peasants fleeing this tax burden (Somers, 1979: 684).

also to the south (Lewis, 2009b)<sup>147</sup>. The Huang Chao Rebellions period (875-884) formally consecrated the fragmentation of the empire under its provincial lines. This refers to the leader of an important group of bandits who plundered vast parts of China and threatened the dynasty by taking the capital. Upon its recovery, the Tang were ruling mainly the capital's territory (Cohen, 2000: 92). The last three decades of the Tang saw the transformation of fifty provincial regimes into a 'dozen regional states' (Somers, 1979: 789).

### 1.2.3 The 'Five Dynasties' and the building of the office-state

The 'Five Dynasties' period (907-960) refers to the 'dynasties' which came from the Tang class of military governors, who successively ruled, each after a military seizing of the power of the immediate predecessor (once with the help of the Khitans<sup>148</sup>). They were located in the northern part of the former Tang Empire that the rebel Zhu secured, establishing the Liang dynasty following his overthrow of the Tang. This period is alternatively called the 'Five Dynasties *and Ten Kingdoms*' period. The Southern and Western parts of the former Chinese Empire (including the remnants of the Tang dynasty) were indeed ruled independently by outlaws turned 'military entrepreneurs' (Clark, 2009), and embedded in a web of intense diplomacy. The name of the period, coined by a Song official historian, 'tidies up a messy period with misleading simplicity' (Lorge, 2005: 17), so as to prove the legitimacy of the Song as heirs of the Tang in the passing of the Heavenly Mandate.

Wang Gungwu (1963) had innovatively proposed that such dynastic periodisation should be set aside, in favour of an understanding of the late Tang to early Song (755-979) as a distinct process. According to him, the Tang model of regional governorship was mostly

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<sup>147</sup> Local military offices, first bought by landlords for the legal and tax immunity this implied, also led to their participation in rebellions (Somers, 1979: 688).

<sup>148</sup> The involvement of the Khitans in Chinese politics marked their founding of the Liao dynasty. The Khitans received what will be later called the Sixteen Prefectures for their help to the Later Jin dynasty in overthrowing the Later Tang (two of the five dynasties of the period). The Khitans fought for this territory when the second Later Jin ruler reneged on the Jin's end of the bargain. This led to the Later Jin's demise at the hands of the Khitans who did not, however, manage to keep control of the 'Chinese Empire' beyond their Sixteen Prefectures.

developed in the consolidation of imperial power in the Northern part controlled by the Dynasties. These successive rulers thus consolidated the Emperor Personal Army as a governor's army (in the intent that it surpassed in strength its provincial counterparts) and increasingly incorporated the elite through the centralised power of the Palace. In contrast, the Tang were based since its origin on attributing territorial areas to follower and surrendered armies, as military districts, without being supervised by imperial administration; it was therefore easy for them to transform into commissioners with civil and military powers and responsibilities (Mostern, 2011: 128, 134). It was the 'Five Dynasties' which implemented a different spatial reorganisation, displacing such former commissioners' power by reducing their territorial reach or dispatching imperial-trooped outposts staffed by loyal servants, founding new prefectures nearby (Mostern, 2011: 141). The Song dynasty was therefore modelled on the period of 'divided China', rather than being a pursuit of 'universal empire' in which the (early) Tang is supposed to be a crucial instance.

Such analysis must however be grounded more explicitly in the evolution of social power, in order to explain how the relative demilitarisation of the elite occurred, albeit as a protracted process. The more than two century-long military governors' intense struggle for political accumulation, in late Tang regions as in one of the later 'dynastic state' or kingdoms, profoundly affected the composition of the elite. Over time, the former Tang 'aristocratic clans' were killed, or at least became 'diasporas' divorced from their initial political and economic base and whose social network was diminished (Johnson, 1977; Tackett, 2008). From the mid-Tang onwards, many elite families migrated, often to the more stable South, whilst the Five Dynasties' elites with ties to such short-lived dynasts were extremely vulnerable (Tackett, 2006). Such a long period of incessant warfare exhausted the resources of contenders outside of the capital Kaifeng (Lorge, 2011: 231), which administrative territory was enlarged (Mostern, 2011: 139), whilst the independent might of governors declined so that, by the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, they were no longer in position to defy the imperial center (Wang, 1963: 5). The mid-Tang tendency of usurping of provincial agricultural and military colonies as landed estates persisted (Twitchett, 1959: 202), which could, concomitantly with the increasing attraction of court

and official positions, explain the re-orientation of power (and relative demilitarisation) of the former elite families which survived the late Tang regional militarization's and Five Dynasties' devastations.

The first two Song emperors continued to influence this process of displacing the independent territorial power of the militarised elite by 'outposts of state authority' (Mostern, 2011: 153)<sup>149</sup>. The Song founder, coming from the military elite of former Tang regional governors, could have been merely establishing a 'Sixth Dynasty'. However, he succeeded in the conquest of the Southern Ten Kingdoms (960-979) and in furthering the cooptation of the Northern military governors and allies. This occurred notably through marriage and allocation of positions in the capital, in order to cut the elite from their power base (known as the 'dissolving military power over a cup of wine' strategy). More than a natural reunification of China, this was a successful expansionist policy from one of its chief hereditary families of military governors, continuing the project of the preceeding dynasty which its founder had overthrown. The Chinese populations of the Sixteen Prefectures however remained under contending dynasties, the Khitan Liao, and then, from 1125, the Jurchen Jin<sup>150</sup>.

However, this establishment of the office-system does not signify that we can be content with the dominant literature's analysis of Song's internal relations, allegedly pacified, which is supposed to prefigure the subsequent Han or Sinified reigns. Rewarding of the Song elite depended certainly less on expansion and attribution of land. However, this still rested on attribution of political power and privileges, another specific form of the 'political economy of titles' varying according to the contestations around property and power. If the mid-'Five Dynasties' period signalled an important phase of state-formation, it was not toward a stable meritocratic system and coherent, uniform administration. Authority

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<sup>149</sup> This trend can be confirmed by Hartwell's (1982: 408) findings, according to which 'Representatives of the Hopei-Shansi-Shensi military governor alliance provided forty-six percent of the incumbents in fiscal offices between 960 and 986'. Hartwell does not, however, use these data this way.

<sup>150</sup> The legacy of Chinese imperial history, attributing only one Mandate of Heaven at any given time for the sake of establishing imperial legitimacy, has led most scholars to ignore these regimes, whose analysis is beyond the scope of the chapter. However, Standen (2007) interestingly argues that the Liao was a successor 'state' to the Tang.

relations and political geography remained as much singularly contested as for other periods, and this holds the key to understand China's trajectory as open-ended as Europe's.

### 1.3 The Song 'gentry society'

The dominant literature understands the Song dynasty through its pacific, technological, and economic orientations, which allegedly ultimately sealed its fate by leaving it vulnerable to military invasion. The Northern Song is seen as the era of the coming to power of the Confucian scholar-gentry (*shidafu*) and of the consolidation of the office-state apparatus. The Song is also seen as the apogee of Chinese science (Needham, 1954), the Chinese 'Renaissance' (Gernet, 1972), the beginning of the modern period (the Kyoto school)<sup>151</sup>, the source of 'commercial capitalism' (Balazs, 1964), an instance of interrupted 'recurring growth' (Jones, 1999), and a 'medieval economic revolution' (Elvin, 1973). As this period is characterised by important degrees of commercialisation and urbanisation, it has posed a series of questions which revolve around its incapacity to fully carry on modern development, i.e. what would be expected according to the commercial model. I will cast these phenomena in another light by anchoring them in broader socio-spatial and socio-economic pre-modern relations in order to explain the social limits of Song 'modernisation', the new importance of the office-system in intra-elite relations, the origins of the growing 'gentry society', and the flexibility of the tribute-system. This innovative perspective about the Song period hence challenges many assumptions about its 'modernity', as well as outlines the 'gentry studies' inability to explain such elements. This is undertaken not to deny or minimise Song China's significant achievements, but instead so as to better understand the origins and impacts of this original development – which was however still characteristically pre-modern.

The history of the Song period can be summarised through the variations of class relations, building on Brenner's thesis on eco-demographic crises conceived as products of the socio-economic pre-modern system, to be put in geopolitical context.<sup>152</sup> From the population

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<sup>151</sup> This was the center of an important debate, within Japanese scholarship, between the Marxist Tokyo School and the Kyoto School.

<sup>152</sup> However, the scarcity of primary sources imposes certain limitations for the verification of these

increase in South China, we can posit a tendency toward the subdivision of plots, following from the peasants' strategy of social reproduction entailing them to have many children as a protection against the hazards of old age. The state-sponsored territorial expansion of the mid-11<sup>th</sup> Century and landlords' reclamation of lands partially delayed the explosive effect of this tendency of the rise of land/man ratio - without however averting it. As the land possessed became too small to satisfy their subsistence needs, the peasants had to find ways to secure additional incomes, for example by weaving or working outside of their plots. This is, incidentally, what explains the seemingly incredible Song's commercialisation.<sup>153</sup> This however translated into an increase of labour input and therefore a decrease of labour productivity. Moreover faced with rising taxation (deriving from the imperial need of revenues for war), many peasants had to pledge their land to landlords. This balance of power in favour of landlords was only to be exacerbated by the Song dynasty's loss of territories to the Jurchen Jin from 1126. Overpopulation and proper demographic crisis followed from 1200 onwards, a period pervaded with epidemics (Chao, 1986; Hartwell, 1982). This most probably led to a crisis in revenues for the landlord class and the state, explaining the reinvigorated conflicts between them over peasants' labour.

The scarcity of sources renders the Song tenurial pattern difficult to establish beyond doubt<sup>154</sup>, but it can be approximated this way. The Song inherited the large estates and (relatively) free land market from the late Tang following the decline of the equal-field system<sup>155</sup>. It is estimated that a third (Golas, 1980: 303) to a half (Chao, 1986: 113) of the population was landless, and that three quarters of the land was held by officials and landlords constituting 14 percent of the population (Golas, 1980: 304). McDermott (1984) observes variations in the control the landlord class exerted on its tenants. In short, bondage could be either to the land or the landlord; even if the requirement of non-agricultural

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hypotheses.

<sup>153</sup> These phenomena of 'proto-industrialisation' and 'commercialisation' are nonetheless specifically pre-modern and unlikely to provoke a 'take-off'. See Brenner (1997) and Huang (1990), whose works aim to explain this tendency toward 'involution', respectively in pre-modern Europe and the Yangzi Delta from the Ming onwards.

<sup>154</sup> This gave rise to the important controversy about whether the status of the landless population should be considered as contractual tenants (a thesis put forward by the Kyoto School) or rather as servile and bounded labourers (as stated by the Marxist Tokyo School).

<sup>155</sup> On the subsequent increase of land sale contracts, see Hansen (1995).

labour services varied, juridical inferiority was the wider norm. Although the available sources do not permit us to clarify the numbers of tenants vs. bounded labourers, it is very likely that both coexisted<sup>156</sup>.

The Song regime was based on tax collection through the office-system, whose capacity for capturing revenues varied temporally and geographically according to the balance between social forces. The Song taxation system adapted the mid-Tang two-tax system. Labour services were due according to the wealth of the land-owners (the native/resident households, whether small producers or landlords without official family connections). The land tax, of around 10% of the harvest, was paid by everyone, except guest/non-resident households (i.e. landless people, either unfree labourers, tenants, hired farm labourers, craftsmen, or merchants). On the one hand, the state had to compete with landlords having the means to evade taxation, who accumulated increasingly larger estates by 'welcoming' indebted peasants and opening new lands for cultivation. As peasants' land was increasingly insufficient to provide for subsistence and as taxation increased, this led peasants to mortgage or sell their land to large landowners, to work in large estates, or to pledge their labour (Mazumdar, 1998: 195). Officials greatly benefited from this tendency, themselves investing into large estates (Twitchett, 1962). On the other hand, more distant regions were governed by accommodation to different social relations, partly in order to tame the frequent native/peasant unrest and nomad invasions. For example, in Sichuan and on the frontiers in general, from the Tang conquest of these territories to the Song era, 'local magnates' maintained peasants under personal bondage through their large private militias. These potentates competed for larger territories among themselves and feuds were highly personalised. This led Hartwell (1982: 377) and von Glahn (1987) to qualify this respectively as feudal (rather than 'bureaucratic') and as a dynamic akin to European villein/lord relations.

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<sup>156</sup> Some scholars, such as Niida Noboru, Sudo Yoshiyuki, and Elvin (1973) argue for a type of European-like manorialism. This thesis is convincingly dismissed by McDermott (1984), at least for its qualification of all Song China's class relations. The Song law clearly distinguished between, on the one hand, landlord/tenant relations, whose different status was institutionalised but whose relations were, nonetheless, subjected to imperial law, and, on the other hand, master/servant relations, the former owning 'discretionary judicial powers' over the latter (von Glahn, 1987: 51).

By the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, three quarters of the tax revenues were captured by military expenditures (Mote, 1999: 115). The Song were confronted by the Khitan Liao polity in North China (907-1125) and the Tibetan Tangut Hsi Hsia Empire (1038-1227). The Song became their vassal (which meant that they had to give them tribute) respectively in 1004 and 1042. The dynasty also faced the Mongols, who had been united from 907 on. Faced with the increasing difficulty of accessing the agrarian surplus due to the landlords' tax evasion in an economy of large estates, the Song tried to re-assess official privileges and the size of landholdings. Wang Anshi's Major Reforms (1069-1073) however failed at stabilising the amount of peasant-owned or 'public' lands at the expense of the landlord class. This double challenge explains the Song's turn to unique reliance on 'commercial' revenues. During the North Song reigns, the percentage of revenues gained from indirect taxes indeed steadily increased vs. those of land taxes (Liu, 2005: 94-95)<sup>157</sup>. Such indirect taxes included above all monopolies, commercial taxes, and tax farming. In the 1070s, the Song started a territorial expansion in the southwest and northwest in order to benefit from these salt mining regions (von Glahn, 1987) and to further control the tea trade and production (Smith, 1991). Revenues from commercial taxes and tax-farming arose from the *maipu* system. This refers to the competitive bidding of individuals to manage minor tea monopoly sectors (Lamoureux, 1996: 985; Smith, 1991: 137), minor tax stations<sup>158</sup>, or 'local projects' (such as ferries, roads, bridges, alcohol shops, and the mining industry), in exchange for a fixed fee<sup>159</sup>. All this implied a re-privatisation of public power, from further empowerment of local magnates in newly colonised, and disputed, areas such as Sichuan (von Glahn, 1987) to the outright selling of shares of state power to private agents.

The South Song period began in 1126 when the Jurchen Jin (1115-1234), having vanquished the former Liao regime, grabbed 35% of the Song population after long years of war in the Northern territories. In 1138, the Song became a 'vassal' of the Jin. It took years of uncertainties to tame northern warlords and restore the imperial power in the South

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<sup>157</sup> Liu however infers from these data the emergence of a modern commercial economy.

<sup>158</sup> Tax stations were established to collect land tax in newly settled areas (Clark, 1992; Mostern, 2003) as well as to collect tax on merchandises transported as part of China's long-distance trade. When Liu discusses commercial taxes, he refers to the later type.

<sup>159</sup> The revenues from the selling of rights for local projects by itself amounted to 10% of all state revenues in 1077 (Liu, 2012).



(Tao, 2009). Following the war with Jin, banditry and rebellion were widespread, to the point that the center appointed many of their leaders to government positions. The acceptance of the peace with Jin might have had more to do with the emperor's need to curtail the power of its new, Tang-like, northern regional commanders than with the Jin threat *per se*. The ruling class was, in addition, deeply divided over the goals that the empire should pursue, witnessing power struggles over foreign policy (notably by former northern military governors seeking to recover their lost territories) and internal administration.

The 'localist turn' (Hartwell, 1992) occurred during this period. Factionalism at court amongst families monopolising high-office holding (from the Northern founding elites and important families) was so exacerbated at the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century that it rendered risky the former unique reliance on office-holding. This risk was further deepened by the new quotas, according to geographical provenance, of the examination system. As it was the local magistrates who recommended candidates, this propelled the former office-holding elite's strategy of inter-marriage with local gentries. The latter, who could now more easily access to office-holding, therefore further diversified its strategies of social reproduction (Bossler, 1998).

The ruling house continued via diverse strategies to secure revenues in its competition with the landlords, such as entrenching the tenancy system in order to avoid tax default, by reinforcing the landowners' right over their tenants (through anti-runaway laws, harder punishments against tenants, etc.). Alternatively, the Song tried to reduce the arbitrariness in landlords/producers relations through a series of 'enlightened' policies in order to protect its more secure tax base. Relief granaries were established in order to face recurrent subsistence crises, food riots, and landlord grabbing of peasant land. The landlords finally were, however, the main beneficiaries of such policies, gaining titles from their collaboration when not gaining hold of the public land attributed to peasants' relief itself<sup>160</sup>. Other attempts to curtail the landlords' increasing power extended to its family policies,

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<sup>160</sup> See, among others, Hymes *et al.*, 1993.

aiming at limiting the inheritance right of agnatic kin and daughters while enhancing the imperial claim on 'extinct households' lands (Bernhardt, 1999; Birge, 1999)<sup>161</sup>. Overall, the landlords' ability to grab land was further increased during the South Song era after the devastation of the Jin invasion. They increasingly had the upper hand, managing through connections to 'hide' their property from tax, and most of the time made the ruling house retract those policies which were not to their advantage (Hymes and Schirokauer, 1993; Twitchett and Smith, 2009). On top of fleeing from debt and frequent rent evasion, peasants increasingly revolted against the increase in additional taxes and labour services or long-term tenancy contracts, practices which had become the norm. Their uprisings occurred on different scales and were directed either at the state and its officials or at the landlords (or at both, as these categories often concurred)<sup>162</sup>. The conflicts between landlords and the ruling house reached their apex following Jia Sidao's Public Fields Law (in the 1260s), ascribing a maximum quota of land to be held and permitting the state to forcibly 'buy' over-quota lands.

At that time, the Mongols governed North China and were about to conquer the South Song, an endeavour accomplished by 1279. However, the dynasty did not collapse because of its Confucian inclination. It rather collapsed because geopolitical competition induced fiscal crises and threatened the socio-political arrangement on extraction and redistribution of revenues. This acquired a specific form as for all dynasties, as did the form of re-privatisation of 'public' power this led to. The Song Empire was caught within a 'multi-state system' (Rossabi, 1983) seeing multiple contenders for the Heavenly Mandate. However, it was not an exceptional situation since the beginning of the empire: the period between the Han and Sui dynasties as well as the 'Five Dynasties' era are also characterised as being 'each under its own Son of Heaven' (Franke and Twitchett, 1994: 8). 'China' has, indeed, been 'among equals', and even among equal polities claiming the status of 'the' Chinese Empire, throughout an important part, if not most of its history<sup>163</sup>. Overall, this

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<sup>161</sup> McKnight (2000) reaches similar conclusions on the increase over time of the state's claim on extinct households.

<sup>162</sup> The Fang La Rebellion (1120-1121) and Lake Rebellion (1130-1135) are the most covered Song peasant revolts. For a list of such revolts, see Deng (1999: 363-376).

<sup>163</sup> Hui (2007: 12) shows that the presence of a universal empire was less frequent in the history of China than

illustrates that, like social agency, geopolitics does not matter only at times of transitions.

## 2. Non-Eurocentric China/Europe ‘reciprocal comparison’

Once pitched against Chinese history, the flimsiness of the groundings of the concepts of office system and World Order becomes apparent. These are as misleading as their early modern Western counterpart of the emerging capitalist national states caught in the Westphalian international system. Where does a non-Eurocentric ‘reciprocal comparison’ lead us to, if we remove its naturalisation of Europe’s *differentia specifica*, the assumption of its homogeneity, the postulate of universal rationality and the ontologising of categories of analysis? I shall first compare the long-term European and Chinese developmental trajectories and then specific pre-modern attributes of those polities.

### 2.1 Europe and China in the long run

During the lifespan of the Qin Empire’s first unification of China to the South Song, Europe went from the Roman Empire to ‘feudal empires’ (650-950) governed by domestic lordship as during the Carolingian Empire rule, then to ‘feudal anarchy’ (950-1150) under banal lordship in the context of ‘parcellisation of sovereignty’, and finally to the ‘feudal state-system’ (1150-1400) and its landlordship (Teschke, 2003). It is only in the latter period that the relatively more centralised tax/office state and international system (both albeit still pre-modern) emerged simultaneously upon the monopolisation of banal power by the victorious lords in their political competition. There were important differences among regimes due to varying ‘local’ adaptations upon the dissolution of the Frankish Empire<sup>164</sup>. Attempts to centralise sovereignty into the institution of kingship (or emperorship) imply the building of ‘personal ownership of the rights of taxation, trade, and legislation’, or more simply put, the ‘royal ownership of public power’ (Teschke, 2003: 171-172). Consequently, conflicts around power tended to take the form of struggles around the means to exercise sovereignty, as a right monopolised but not controlled (i.e. in the office and military

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its division: ‘Overall, even the minimal definition yields only 936 years of unification throughout the long span of Chinese history. Unification was slightly more common in the second millennium (538 years) than in the first (398 years). If we take 221 BC when Qin established the first unified empire as the base year, 936 years represent only 40 percent of 2,221 years.’

<sup>164</sup> For an overview of the Spanish, German, French, British, and papal long-term processes of state-formation, see Teschke, 2003: 97-109.

institutions).

Available China/Europe comparisons remain unsatisfactory as they revolve around the dichotomy of state-system vs. empire, as do the ‘Rise of the West’ narratives. In the literature on China, such divergence is mostly located in the Tang dynasty’s consecration of the political unification of China (e.g. Adshead, 2004; Scheidel, 2009). In contrast, I have demonstrated that this trajectory was far from a linear one towards absolute centralisation of power, however much punctuated by inter-dynastic interruptions. Taken both in its social and spatial dimensions, this trajectory can be seen as a series of moments in which contingent, but retrospectively intelligible resolutions of social conflicts and reproduction crises shaped the history of the Chinese Empire.

Concepts derived from European history can only be used precautiously, as elements of comparison. The ‘Six Dynasties’ period could be viewed as the wax and wane of equivalents of medieval feudal polities. The notion of emperorship as a succession of dynasties inheriting a ‘state’ indeed seems to be imposed in retrospect on a history of highly militarised lordship patterns. The actors were interpersonally bonded through obligations of military assistance while they consistently feuded amongst themselves. At the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, a particularly strong contender, the Wei, emerged in the North, more successful at elite cooptation through redistribution of fruits of recurring conquests. Challenges from co-ruling nobles periodically implied the trade of one reigning warlord for another, but a distinct pattern was institutionalised which laid the basis for a more personalised rule less dependent on followers, the equal-field system. Far from being absolute and constant during the empires’ time span, as the myths of Oriental Despotism and AMP would have it, the ‘state’ property of land was first a strategy to extract surpluses and soldiery, and its range was limited to areas the dynast could relatively directly control (mainly around the capital). This could be implemented only within a context of constant conquests (including ‘internal unification’) through geopolitical accumulation, as a means to further reward the nobility after the initial granting of relative territorial autonomy. Upon its halt and the fiscal crises and growing empowering of military governors this led to, re-privatisation of ‘public’ power occurred from the mid-Tang on. China never fully reverted to proper feudal

anarchy as did Europe. Over the course of the first millennium of Imperial China, private forces however had to be re-'purchased' every step along the way through war, marriage, or financial compensations as in Europe (Gerstenberger, 2007). This led to the relative demilitarisation of forces as a two-century long protracted process only relatively completed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> reign of the Song dynasty. The Song were still in competition for the extraction of revenues from peasants, and how the 'state' institutionalised and granted access to differentiated rights to surpluses was still contested. This acquired particular intensity under geopolitical pressures. This is what cannot be captured by conceptualising the Chinese empire as a static long-term project kept whole by its bureaucracy and its unchallenged place in the World Order within a de-militarised narrative.

## 2.2 Eurasian pre-modern elements

Although clearly and eminently specific to its social trajectory, pre-Yuan Imperial China's commercial activity, forms of property, office system, elites' ways of social reproduction, and socio-spatial activity share many parallels with continental Europe's absolutist states.<sup>165</sup> The European geopolitical system, class relations, and state forms were not unique nor somehow intrinsically leading to modernity: they had Chinese counterparts many centuries before. On the one hand, shedding light this way on the equally pre-modern character of Europe directly confronts the 'Rise of the West' narratives' assumption of an early modernity in Europe. On the other hand, such comparison situating continental Europe and China on a pre-modern continuum implies the abandonment of a specific mode for non-European civilisations, either Asiatic or tributary, or of picturing China as an inverted mirror of the West.

The late Tang and Song reliance on monopolies and supervision of trade leads the traditional literature to conceptualise it as a 'Great Divergence' from Europe, due to the alleged autonomy of its merchants (Balazs, 1964<sup>166</sup>; Mielants, 2002). Rights to control

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<sup>165</sup> Due to the comparatively early sophistication and complexity of the Chinese state apparatus, the comparison is generally better fitted with later continental Europe's absolutist states than with European political units contemporary to the Tang and Song dynasties. The unique English agrarian capitalist path is excluded from this comparison.

<sup>166</sup> Balazs borrows Weber's thesis according to which self-government in China was a feature of the villages

some trade granted by the emperor emphasised that it was his to grant, as any other office; it also holds true for European monopolies and trading charters (Brenner, 1993; Teschke, 2003: 205-208). The allegedly exceptional Chinese ‘prohibition’ of free trade was rather a common feature of China and Europe, as the key to wealth, both for the ruling dynasty and the private agents, involved restricting internal and international exchange. Fundamentally, in European and Chinese markets alike, profit was made in the sphere of circulation and the access to this sphere was politically constituted: it was precisely the politically induced obstacles to competition by the granting of privileges which accounted for the lucrative nature of such trade.

This chapter also challenges the myth of the lack of class diversity in China. Contrary to Banaji’s (2010) definition of the tributary mode of production, the Chinese ruling class was not ‘owned’ by the state, whether we mean by this concept landlords or officials. The relations between the dynasty and the ruling class varied during this period. Heavily militarised landed aristocracies of the like of European pre-absolutist regimes were common until the Song. Even during the Song, landlords were independent from the state, as state service was only one strategy of social reproduction among others and this class kept the coercive means to ensure their domination over their peasants. Moreover, elites’ strategies of social reproduction were similar to Europe’s. Pre-modern pattern of ‘non-development’ (Brenner, 1986, 1997), fuelled by conflictual relations, both between and amongst elites, ruling house, and producers, set in a likewise conflictual geopolitical context, led to fiscal, subsistence, and social reproduction crises. As in Europe, the Chinese elite could grab land and expand the taxation base: either from native populations through military means (particularly on the frontiers); from nature by opening new land for cultivation (using peasant’s labour); from other landlords or governors (particularly in more ‘distressed’ times); or from the state, either ‘legally’ (through office, both through official lands and the advantages this status conferred) or illegally (by ‘sheltering’ indebted and formally free - thus taxed by the state - peasants).

If the Chinese office-state can by no means be deemed to be the same as those of Europe, parallels can nonetheless be traced. Chinese dynasts' recourse to venal offices occurred most notably during the 'Six Dynasties' and from mid-Tang to Song (in other periods, the sale of offices did not imply their hereditariness). This however departed from the office market spawned under the *Ancien Régime* (Gerstenberger, 2007: 383-388, 606-610; Teschke, 2003: 173-177). Even in 'peaceful' times, if offices were not straightforwardly sold, these were nevertheless to a certain extent 'rented' through patronage, sponsorship, and recommendations, becoming a source of legal and illegal income beyond the salary formally attached to such posts. The strength of mechanisms ensuring against total privatisation of public power (rule of avoidance, revocability, short tenure, non-hereditary character of offices, imperial approval of its agents, absence of sub-imperial power of appointment) were subject to the balance of power between the emperor and officials, either as landlords, governors, or warlords (their capacity to evade those mechanisms relying on militarily- and politically-constituted power).

Modernity of military institutions and monopoly over violence are generally drastically backdated for early modern Europe as for Imperial China. The dynastic hold on the military institution depended, in China as in Europe, on the balance of power within the ruling class. After the 'Six Dynasties' era in which there were no pretension over monopolisation over violence, it was comparable (if by no means identical), at times, to the French venality of army offices and military entrepreneurs (Teschke, 2003: 184-189). Military positions were bought or militarily contended for during the Tang, who furthermore had to mostly rely on mercenary nomad troops from the An Lushan Rebellions<sup>167</sup>. Even the Song did not have an absolute monopoly over violence. Landlords acquired titles and tax exemptions for the organisation of local militias. Pretensions over such monopoly were particularly insecure at times of important geopolitical crises, such as during the threat of Tang-like privatisation of regional commands during the transition to the South Song. The ambiguous relations of the South Song with the Northern Loyalist rebel armies in Jin territories, given offices for nominal subordination, without being integrated in the imperial army (Peterson, 1983),

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<sup>167</sup> It had also lost intermittently its monopoly over foreign policy, even prior to the An Lushan Rebellion. See Skraff (2012) on the usurpation of international relations by powerful Tang frontier commanders.

pertained also to such incompleteness.

Far from being uniquely hierarchical compared to Europe, Chinese international relations shared important parallels with Europe during the times of the Westphalian treaties. The hierarchy/anarchy dichotomy, attributing divergent mechanisms to Europe and East Asia, does not capture the pre-modern nature of both systems. According to Wolhort *et al.* (2007), the balance of power was not operating in many non-Western international systems. On the one hand, this proposition must be extended also to Europe, equally plagued with 'predatory dynastic equilibrium' fuelled by geopolitical accumulation (Teschke, 2003: 233-238). On the other hand, the balance of power did not operate in China, but not because the tributary system promoted cooperation under China's hegemony. It was rather for reasons similar as in the case of Europe. The tributary system was motivated by temporary agreements on coveted territories (often at the expense of 'nomads'), always re-negotiated so as to freeze the *status quo* favourable to some powers at some points. It also served the repeated re-mapping of East Asia, which was, contrarily to IR and traditional Sinology literatures' assumptions, the norm. The Chinese Empire did not unfold in a geopolitical vacuum: even in periods of 'unification', it was always threatened by other units, whether we qualify these as 'semi-nomads' (Tibetans, Jurchens, Xi Xia, Khitans) or 'Sinicised' polities (Korean and Vietnamese kingdoms, Japan). Processes of state-formation (including 'Confucianisation' of many of those polities, including the 'semi-nomad' ones) happened conjointly in a context of war as *prima ratio*. China was not always at the apex of the World Order, and always had to contend for the Heavenly Mandate.

In short, pre-modern empires in the East as in the West share similar characteristics. Exchange was subject to political power in a variety of ways. The ruling houses competed with other classes and polities for the extra-economic extraction of peasant surplus. Participation in the state apparatus meant a share in the distribution of these surpluses and its access was politically mediated. Incomplete monopolisation of military might took a panoply of forms, and the pre-modern polities interacted in a context of socio-political diversity of units. Only by investigating historically the forms that the agents gave to each social institution in power struggles occurring in distinct socio-economic and geopolitical



contexts can we successively apprehend the specificities of European (in the plural) and Chinese trajectories.

### **Conclusion**

Significant parallels can be drawn between China and Europe through anti-Eurocentric reciprocal comparison, even if concepts pertaining to the latter's trajectories can by no means be simply transposed to understand the social relations of the former. Their uttermost significance for confronting the 'Rise of the West' narratives lies in revealing the pre-modern character of Europe, through the analysis of analogous processes and institutions that we have no difficulties as viewing as pre-modern in their occurrence in China. This implies providing means for understanding singularities, arising from particular conflicts around power defined and deployed simultaneously socially and spatially, within pan-Eurasian broad pre-capitalist similarities.

Most fundamentally, this chapter is a milestone of my intervention within the 'Great Divergence' debate. The California School has set the agenda for comparing Eurasian trajectories in order to demonstrate that Europe was on the same path than China until very late in their development. However, the California School's neo-institutionalist framework comparing indicators of development conforms to an anachronistic conceptual framework reproducing Eurocentrism. This is what leads them to assume, like the traditional literature, the Chinese 'state' and World Order as perennial features of a given geopolitical environment or normative predisposition. For these scholars, the Confucian elite and empire are ultimately conceptualised at the origins of China's divergent, stable, but overall un-progressive, imperial trajectory lasting until the contact with the West.

The PM method has enabled me to challenge such assumptions about the Confucian benevolent elite and imperial form of political authority, as being consolidated under the Tang and Song dynasties and as historical features at the core of China's rise or 'non-rise'. Neither in Imperial China's nor in pre-19<sup>th</sup> Century continental Europe can the origins of development and 'non-development' be theoretically derived from reified geopolitical environment and state forms. If the European international system and its state forms need not be considered as unique entities to be deciphered, neither does its Chinese and East

Asian equivalents.

## Chapter Six – Late Imperial China in International Relations and Sinology. Beyond the Commercialisation Model

Alongside the Ottoman Empire, Late Imperial China<sup>168</sup> has constituted the subject *par excellence* with which to compare early modern Europe in order to stress the uniqueness of the latter. From the Renaissance thinkers to Marx and Weber, most classical works have identified in the Chinese empire obstacles the West overcame or never had to meet: despotism, passive ideology, rural economy, etc. Mismanaged by corrupted emperors and eunuchs, Late Imperial China shied away from world encounters and succumbed to barbarians' assaults. Only the arrival of Europeans began to shake off the stupor in which this large but immobile power was caught for centuries.

A different picture of Late Imperial China has arisen out of the combined assault of World History and the renewal of comparative history. Moving away from the depiction of China as stagnating and backward, such scholars have unearthed the Mongol interlinking of Eurasia, the commercial effervescence started by the Ming and the administrative achievements of the Qing. This is now a period we recognise as of intensified interconnections, first brought through the Mongol *oecumene* and subsequently extended through the inter-Asian tribute-system of the Ming. The territorial expansion of the Qing, forcing itself on the new Russian neighbours and deepening involvement with European traders, completes this narrative. Not only the literature in IR and HS recognises the important Eurasian interactions in which Late Imperial China historically took part (Abu-Loghod, 1989; Buzan and Little, 2000; Chauduri, 1978; Hobson, 2004), but from this broadening of perspective to a pan-continental level has arisen a new field of enquiry: Eurasian similarity (Pomeranz, 2000). Whereas China was previously used as an example of the far end of the tradition/modernity scale (Fairbank and Goldman, 2006), diverse 'early modern' societies are now compared in terms of differences of degree rather than nature (Lieberman, 2009).

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<sup>168</sup> In the literature, Late Imperial China encompasses the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties, sometimes reaching back to the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368).

The popularity of Frank's *ReOrient* (1998), and more broadly of the California School's works, is to be understood in this context. *ReOrient* has made an important contribution by imposing a global lens to appreciate the emergence of Europe. For Frank, the history of Late Imperial China is intertwined with this process, and China cannot likewise be understood without reference to its place in the world economy, at the apex of which it was for the 1400-1800 period.

This departs from the orientations of the traditional comparisons in IR. As I have illustrated in Chapter One, in HS and economic history, debates about China usually revolve around how its socio-political organisation prevented the repetition of the European trajectory. Classical thinkers like Marx and Weber set this framework. This is still influential in IR, which builds on the 'Rise of the West' narratives understanding the Chinese state as despotic/patrimonial, whether ineffective or predatory (Hui, 2005; Jones, 1988; Mann, 1986; North and Thomas, 1973) or tributary/imperial, and therefore pre-empting the participation of the merchant class (Anderson, 1974; Banaji, 2010; Mielants, 2007; Wallerstein, 1974). These scholars rely on mainstream assumptions in Sinology when studying the corresponding inhibiting political factors preventing Late Imperial China from undertaking a European-like development.

In this chapter, I will argue that in order to understand this period both the 'national' level of the traditional comparisons and the 'global' level advocated by Frank are inadequate. The level of the national state is faulty not because it diverts our attention away from the global one, as Frank claims, but for the distinctions it anachronistically attributes to pre-modern entities, as does the 'world economy' category. This literature review establishes the theoretical grounds for the subsequent reconstruction of the history of Late Imperial China and comparison with early modern Europe. I will thus propose a method to understand the social contestations of, and changes to, forms of sociopolitical arrangements which were neither leading China away from continental Europe's development path nor embodying an earlier incarnation of it. Moreover, this specific trajectory must be understood as breaking apart 'China' as a coherent unit of analysis. Crucial to this is the evaluation of the constant negotiations between what most scholars called 'public' and

‘private’ or ‘domestic’ and ‘external’ in order to elucidate how their delimitations arose from political struggles and were thus only partially and temporarily enforced. Conceiving of sociopolitical institutions as deriving from conflicts around property and power means that we should consider phenomenologically such notions and phenomena as moral order, Sinicisation, state regulation on trade, guilds, market, and lineages. Anchoring within the social-property relations and political geography of Late Imperial China the ‘political’ institutions traditional IR and Sinology see as impeding development as well as the ‘economic’ activities Global Historians conceive of as modern reveals the fallacy of studying them as divorced from one another. The division of labour between ‘gentry studies’ and economic history has only served to mystify how both the definitions of state and commerce, or power and property, were always at stake and contested in complex and mutually imbricating ways.

The chapter proceeds in three steps. Firstly, I will present the innovative thesis of *ReOrient* within the field of IR and critically evaluate its claim for a global perspective<sup>169</sup>. I will contend that Frank’s argument expresses the flaws of both the WST, i.e. functionalism and incapacity to explain changes and variations, and of the anti-Eurocentric commercialisation model applied to the ‘Rise of the West’, i.e. the inability to understand ‘Europe’s adaptability’ (Hobson in Bala, 2012) due to its understanding as a homogenous entity.

This will bring me, secondly, to the debates in Sinology Frank’s thesis derives from. I will argue that Frank’s location in the traditional literature on Late Imperial debates between Neo-Smithians and Neo-Malthuseans is untenable as he is forced to fit, unsuccessfully, empirical data stemming from Malthusean patterns into a Neo-Smithian argument. As Frank’s work is overly derivative, especially when it comes to ‘domestic’ elements, I will then turn in the next section to the scholars he bases his work on in order to bring his assumptions on Chinese development into focus. Frank’s thesis has to be thus situated within the Western Sinologist literature transposing the commercial model to ‘early modern’ China. This new Sinology, which includes the California School, contends with

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<sup>169</sup> Although Frank is not himself an IR scholar, his works have strongly influenced debates within the discipline on this point.

traditional Sinology according to which the state and communal institutions like lineages precluded the following of the European developmental trajectory by their impeding of free markets and trade. Re-evaluating the wider social relations such institutions were grounded in reveals the limitations of both approaches. Among those limitations figure prominently their common abiding by the ‘dynastic cycles’ paradigm. Moreover, since it relies on the commercialisation model, the overall idea of Eurasian similarity proceeds by projecting capitalist characteristics onto both early modern continental Europe and Late Imperial China. These new Sinologists (like Frank) go beyond the traditional ideal-typified opposition between dynamic European development and the stagnating Chinese Empire only by inverting their positions, which ultimately likewise reifies the Chinese trajectory. The PM critique of the commercial model can therefore be deployed against this new Sinology whilst highlighting the specific social rationality governing Chinese trade relations.

This literature review will finally lead me to an alternative perspective on Late Imperial China, outlined in a phenomenology of the Chinese economy. As specified in Chapter Four, such a phenomenology of power directly confronts the Eurocentric analytical anachronism of uncritically importing the modern vocabulary from experiences of European modernities. By anchoring social meanings in social property relations, this analysis will debunk a series of myths on the Chinese polity, revealed as such by sociologically interpreting rationality and drawing attention to what the elites contended for through a political economy of shares of ‘state’ power: the politically-constituted access to land and people. So after having criticised the new Sinology’s stance on Late Imperial China’s market, as well as the state’s relation to trade and state-society relations, my PM-inspired analysis will make sense of these social phenomena by studying the imperial doctrine of *minsheng* (popular welfare) and the contradictory ways it was used to enforce dynastic, gentry and merchants’ claims over this share of ‘public’ power. Beyond its parallels with European ‘enlightened’ governance, the *sui generis* political order through Confucian benevolence exhibits the specificity of conflicts over property and power in Late Imperial China. This will therefore provide an overview of spatial and temporal discontinuities in the Late Imperial period which will be further substantiated in the next chapter.

## **1. Late Imperial China in International Relations debates: the integration in the world-economy**

In this section, I will first summarise Frank's method and his thesis on the impact of the world economy on the diverging paths of Europe and China, emphasising his understanding of the latter. A critique of the thesis he shares with other Global Historians, on the relation with the 'Rise of the West', will follow.

### 1.1 Frank's *ReOrient* thesis

Frank's *ReOrient* (1998) had a strong impact on the rehabilitation of the study of East Asia in IR. Frank's major claim is that Asia dominated the world economy until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He incorporates the works of a plurality of Global Historians or proponents of the California School, whilst including in his overall conception of the working of a single world economy smaller world-systems studied by others, such as the Afro-Eurasian system (Abu-Loghod, 1991), the *Pax Mongolica* (Hobson, 2004), the Chinese tribute-trade system (Hamashita, 2008) and – albeit with major revisions – the now not so modern European world-economy (Wallerstein, 1974). Along similar lines as these Global Historians, Frank thus characterises the emergence of modern Europe as late and derivative of developments happening in the East. If he is also interested in the manner Europe benefitted from its interaction with the rest of the world (from 'world technologies' to material resources from its colonies), Frank's primary focus is put on the workings of the world economy itself, and how it impacted on the position of each region<sup>170</sup>. The world economy furthering a global division of labor among its units undergoes Kondratieff cycles of expansion ('A' phase) and contraction ('B' phase). Frank is mostly interested in showing that China was at the apex of this system in the period 1400-1800 (an 'A' expansion phase), which he concludes from its higher productivity and positive balance of trade.

This is where the European and Chinese paths intersect to radicalise Abu-Lughod's thesis that the 'decline of the East' preceded the 'Rise of the West'. In this period, the division of

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<sup>170</sup> 'Regions' are areas in which the core mechanisms of the economy – trade and the division of labour - are more intensive than between them (Frank, 1998: 61).

labour was predicated upon the fact that the West had to pay (with silver) for the East Asian goods it sought since it lacked commodities to export in exchange (Frank, 1998: 66). This inflow of money stimulated the Chinese economy further by driving expansion, population growth and commercialisation, and by financing manufacturing. Moreover, it did so without inflation since it was also supported by an increasing demand for products, in opposition to Europe (Frank, 1998: 160-162). When its American silver influx dried out in the 18th Century, the West had to look for other options allowing it to continue to access the Asian markets. This incentive was strong enough for the West to lower its labour cost of production by innovating technologically (Frank, 1998: 292-293). Such a strategy was possible as, due to the inflow of capital from its colonies, the price of capital in the West was now cheaper than labor while the opposite was true for China caught in the declining 'B' phase of its cycle. For Frank (1998: 304), Asia was then a victim of its preceding strong rise of productivity, in what is known as the 'high equilibrium trap' (Elvin, 1973). According to this thesis, demographic and productivity increases ultimately lead to cheaper labour and scarce resources, and thus to disincentives to invest in technologies. This is how Frank explains the rise and decline of regions through the impact of the division of labour enabled by the world economy.

Frank's comparison between Europe and China, built on Pomeranz (2000) and Chaudhuri (1978), leads him to conclude: 'all available estimates of world and regional population, production, and income, as well as the discussion above on world trade, confirm that Asia and various of its regional economies were far more productive and competitive and had far and away more weight and influence in the global economy than any or all of the "West" put together until at least 1800' (Frank, 1998: 174). When discussing Chinese domestic institutions, Frank resorts to the same strategy as used for his analysis of trade: he identifies the similarities between Europe and Asia. He does so without grounding them in their wider socio-political backgrounds, as those contexts were shaped by external economic needs, domestic institutions being determined by the necessities of the world economy and being the consequence rather than the cause of economic development (Frank, 1998: 206, 208). His study of Chinese institutions is therefore confined to stating that diverse market institutions, such as guilds and bills of exchange, were present there as well as in Europe, in



an urbanised, commercialised, and monetised economy. This is however more than a mere anti-Eurocentric strategy: it contains the important postulate that commerce *per se* breeds economic development through the division of labour and specialisation it furthers. The state's main characteristic is thus that it did not interfere with the flourishing of the economy, allowing a free market in land and labour. The Chinese state was pushed by external economic exigencies to provide the minimal requirements for this economic flourishing. These include the provision of a transport infrastructure, expansion of arable land, and more generally the support of trade and promotion of 'national economic interests' (Frank, 1998: 205).

### 1.2 Frank's *ReOrient*. A critique

Theoretically, Frank's thesis shares the flaws of the broader WST. Its original twist lies in Frank's application of the characteristics of Wallerstein's 16<sup>th</sup> Century capitalist world-economy to a world economy spanning throughout the history of mankind. It replicates and extends Wallerstein's functionalism. By pushing WST to its extreme, Frank's new model however has the merit of laying bare two characteristics of this theory: the flattening of differences and the conceptualisation of trade itself as the motor of development. Since state character derives from the exigencies of their position within the world economy, the origin and transformation of political regimes, as well as variations between those faced with similar international constraints, are hence bound to be left unexplained, except by recourse to geo- or techno-determinism.

Empirically, Frank's view on the shift in favour of Europe does not hold either. Even if Frank would stress its temporary and relative character on top of its lateness, his thesis on the 'Rise of the West' shares the same pitfalls as the other would-be anti-Eurocentric narratives. The common key contention of Pomeranz, Hobson, and Frank is that the opening of the world horizon, whether by integration into the world-economy, globalisation, and/or discovery of the New World, was causally linked to the 'Rise of the West', whether through the channelling of resources, importation of technologies and ideas, and/or the division of labour it created. In a nutshell, we are never told why a certain amount of goods at any given point in time would make a difference in development. All

thus rely on these Global Historians' empirical findings of a take-off, one I have demonstrated before that could not be found in Europe taken as a homogenous entity.<sup>171</sup>

Similarly, the only way Frank can assess who is at the apex of this world economy at a given point of time is by its degree of specialisation. What was this Eurasian similarity before the effects of the world economy kicked in and put Europe on a different path? To enquire further into the potential pitfalls of such an analysis on empirical grounds, we must go back to the Sinology on which Frank relies.

## **2. A reassessment of the 'economy' of Late Imperial China in Sinology debates**

Given that an analysis of Chinese development proper is found wanting in Frank's work, let us turn to the broader 'revisionists' or Californian Scholars who also uphold the 'Eurasian similarity' thesis<sup>172</sup>. I will first locate them in the wider body of Neo-Smithian Sinology. I will thereafter enquire further into the assumptions of the commercialisation model adapted to China's context, more specifically the Neo-Smithian views on Late Imperial China's market, trade, and stability. I will show how the very indicators whose validity Frank takes for granted have to be understood in the specific context of China's social relations. In this context, I thus want to ask: what are the consequences of demographic growth? How to conceptualise China's commercialisation? Did the influx of silver led to a further division of labour? How was trade organised? I will demonstrate that those are questions which cannot be answered without referring to the ways power was socio-politically constituted.

### 2.1 Neo-Smithians and Neo-Malthuseans in Sinology: Frank's ambiguous positioning

Broadly speaking, in the field of Sinology on Late Imperial China, the origins and effects of the important wave of Ming-Qing commercialisation form the object of explanation. Different perspectives contend however on their significance. This debate opposes the Neo-Malthuseans seeing this as pertaining to a characteristically pre-modern development

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<sup>171</sup> See the Introduction and Chapter One.

<sup>172</sup> In the literature review, I have contended with the method the California School uses to understand the 'Great Divergence'. Here I evaluate its analysis of the social development of Late Imperial China proper.

(Elvin, 1973)<sup>173</sup> to the diverse approaches qualifying this commercialisation as modern, the Neo-Smithians. Among the latter figure very different schools, from the Western paradigm stressing property rights parallels between China and Europe (Buoye, 2000; Raswki, 1972) to the Chinese literature on ‘capitalist sprouts’ and the California School. In all those latter works, it is implied that ‘trade was the *deus ex machina*’ (Isett, 2007:155) either rendering peasants, landlords and merchants subject to market imperatives (in Western Sinology) or transforming ‘rentier and gentry landlords’ presiding over bounded and servile tenants into ‘common and managerial landlords’ using wage labour (in Chinese Marxist Sinology).

Albeit arguing that this commercialisation pattern was induced by ‘external’ factors (by the influx of silver and increased demand for export) rather than ‘internally’ created, Frank argues like the California School that Chinese development was boosted in a Smithian fashion by increased specialisation and division of labour brought by commercialisation accompanied by demographic growth. This leads to a conundrum when explaining the Chinese development halt around 1800, and neo-Smithians then resort to neo-Malthusean explanations. Neo-Smithians indeed assume an allocation of labour to the most rewarding specialisation, in terms of productivity, as long as there are such opportunities. This drying out of opportunities ranges from Pomeranz’ missing ‘ghost acreages’ to traditional Sinology’s Western imperialism, but all revolve around resource constraints leading to the high level equilibrium trap. From that point, they argue that the neo-Malthusean principle applies, as the previously productive economy boosted by the cheap cost of labour becomes a disadvantage in terms of labour-saving innovations.

Could it be in fact that labour intensification was there all along, as a result of the characteristically pre-modern decline in land/labour ratios upon demographic growth<sup>174</sup>?

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<sup>173</sup> Neo-Malthusians use price theory to explain the internal and inevitable dead-end of pre-modern economic development, through the relative changing costs of land and labour induced by demographic increase which led producers to adopt labour-intensive methods.

<sup>174</sup> However, this labour intensification did not arise from the cheapness of labour given its wide availability (as the neo-Malthusians would have it), if only because the inverse proposition does not hold (Isett, 2007: 177). In situations where labour was scarce, as in Qing Manchuria, peasants were not inclined either to adopt labour-saving methods. This is because the ‘choice’ of methods is not based on price mechanisms, but rather has to be deciphered in taking into account the wider social relations.

This could explain the impossibility for the California School to empirically describe a rise in labour productivity, despite their theoretical framework being based on it. Whichever characteristic is attributed to the Ming-Qing commercialisation, for such a thesis about the natural flourishing of the Chinese economy to hold, Frank has to presuppose that the ‘obstacles’ to a market economy traditionally brought up in the literature on China were a chimera. As he does not challenge this literature himself, we have to turn to the scholars his work is derivative from to fully understand his thesis. I will therefore next survey the traditional assumptions in Sinology and the critique the commercialisation model makes of it so as to locate Frank’s fellow Neo-Smithians, mainly Pomeranz but also Takeshi Hamashita, Robert Marks, and Wong, within these debates.

## 2.2 The commercialisation model applied to Late Imperial China: a critique

Traditional Sinology has usually focussed on understanding the Chinese political and cultural institutions which made its developmental path unique in world history. Three main elements stand out, all of them being generally intertwined with the pervasiveness of Confucianism. Firstly, Sinologists study how the imperial state and lineages<sup>175</sup> shaped Chinese society, introducing strong biases in the land market (Beattie, 1979; Ebrey and Watson, 1986; Faure, 2007; Zurndorfer, 1989). The second contention revolves around the state control of, if not hostility to, commerce, not limited to, but including, bans on trade (Balazs, 1964; Huang, 1974a; Weber, 1951). Finally, Chinese history is seen as defined by the periodic decline of dynasties brought about by imperial corruption and mismanagement (Fairbank, 2006), and the gentry’s engrossment (Bol, 2003). Basing his claims on California School works, Frank opposes these first two tropes in mainstream Sinology, on erroneous grounds, I will argue, because his conception of a free market and free exchange pertains to the broader commercialisation model. After that, I will illustrate how those Californian Scholars do not contend with a defining feature of traditional Sinology, the postulate of Late Imperial China’s continuity and cyclical history. My critique of the new Sinology’s stance on these three issues will be grounded in its lack of understanding of social institutions and agents through the prevalent social-property relations. Stemming

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<sup>175</sup> Lineages are understood as property-owning corporate groups in which ritualised acknowledgement of common descent formed the basis for membership.

from Christopher Isett's and Sucheta Mazumdar's PM-inspired work, this critique draws the implications of their analyses of the Chinese patterns of trade for a wider understanding of the manner 'political power' was contended for in Late Imperial China, moreover pointing out this way the Eurocentric aspects of the new Sinology's studies based on the commercialisation model.

### 2.2.1 Free market

Like the Sinologists following the commercialisation model, Frank contends with the notion that political factors impeded a free market in land and labour, or at least a freer market than in Europe. He thus follows Pomeranz' assumptions, who states that, whatever their particularities, 'Chinese property systems seem to have facilitated transfers of usage rights and ownership to those who were positioned to make the most productive use of the land, and to have provided the security and flexibility needed to encourage long-range investment in the productivity of the land.' (Pomeranz, 2008: 102) Among those particularities are the 'right of first refusal' (where kin is offered the first buying option), 'conditional sale' (peasants preserving the right to re-purchase the land they sold), multiple ownership, and lineage lands<sup>176</sup>. Pomeranz concedes that the family was most of the time the unit of production and that there existed strong customary rights favouring tenants. According to him, we cannot however presuppose that such institutions are *per se* inimical to growth because even in Europe modern economic development did not start from a perfectly free market. He discovers that whereas European customs led to such limits to improvement<sup>177</sup>, this was not the case for China where peasants nonetheless adopted the best technological innovations because of the security of their property use which provided an incentive to it.

Despite Pomeranz' originality in confining to China the relation between (albeit customary)

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<sup>176</sup> There are historiographical debates about the extent of such customary limits on free land transactions. Pomeranz, following Buoye (2000), minimizes their extent, whereas Isett (2007), Mazumdar (1998), and Huang (1985, 1990), basing their claim on, among others, Xu Tan, argue that there were strong communal practices governing the land market. However, my argument against Pomeranz goes beyond this controversy.

<sup>177</sup> Pomeranz argues that the technologies available in Europe required investment on a scale which necessitated large holdings to which hereditary tenancy worked contrary (Pomeranz, 2000: 74). Once again we find a contingency argument in his works, if not a techno-determinist one.

property rights and innovations, this argument is a well-established one in the Western literature adapting to the context of Late Imperial China the neo-classical thesis according to which secure property rights lead to modern economic growth. In the end, this is merely a subverting of North's thesis, which has already been criticised in Chapter One. Such scholars find in the East the equivalent of what is assumed in classical narratives to be at the origins of the 'Rise of the West'. Given our previous demonstration that we find only in England modern development (attested by rising labour productivity) during this period, we can thus add Imperial China to other instances, namely continental Europe, where secure property rights did not propel a take-off. Like neo-classical economics, the California School presupposes a *homo economicus* who will act according to capitalist principles before such social relations are established, i.e. agents who will naturally specialise and innovate even though they were under no pressures to do so and despite the fact that, in their context, this would mean undermining their means to secure their material needs. This way, Frank and Pomeranz partake in the wider Western Sinology's Eurocentric flaws of unproblematically assuming a universal rationality driving the relationship of agents to institutions, whereas, I shall argue, we should enquire into the use agents made of the institutions to reproduce themselves socially.

Before making this point, we have to note that Frank also draws on Pomeranz (2000: 80-85) to support his claim that the labour market was freer in China than in Europe. Servile and bound labour was giving way in the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century to free small landholders; once their dependent status had disappeared, such free peasants, tenants and wage labourers could moreover be encouraged by the state to migrate to places with lower labour/land ratios. There is a near consensus in Sinology on this event, although disagreements over its origins<sup>178</sup> and significance persist. As long as this new free status is viewed as a sign of freedom to allocate one's work in areas leading to a systemic and sustained increase in labour productivity (rather than representing a mere extensive agricultural growth which would over time lead to the same patterns of increased labour input those peasants were

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<sup>178</sup> For example, its origins are understood as resulting from the dissolving of the patrimonial nature of the labour market by commercialisation (Zhao, 1986) or, alternatively, from peasants' rebellions (Issett, 2007: 154). Pomeranz is silent on this subject.

fleeing from), this once again postulates behaviours which run contrary to the social context which governed them<sup>179</sup>. I shall argue that it is not the freedom or un-freedom of labour which matters the most. What is most significant are the battles those freed peasants concomitantly choose to fight, i.e. for customary rights to land preventing their separation from the means of subsistence in order to avoid market dependency. Wage labour was one of the strategies towards this end. This demonstrates that land was still the preferred way for them to allocate the household's labour, despite the presence of 'market forces' and, most importantly, in the objective of not being subjected to them.

Pomeranz (2000: 69-70) is right in saying that it is less the operating of the free market according to neo-classical theoretical criteria which matters to assess modern development than the question of whether extra-economic elements impeded efficiency in the use of land. He exemplifies the typical neo-Smithian strategy of showing that development occurred despite its 'traditional' obstacles, land and loan transactions and 'highest yield per acre' being found in the Chinese regions where such institutions were widespread<sup>180</sup>. He nonetheless only partially shakes off the neo-classic assumptions by omitting how lineages, secure tenancy, and other customary institutions shaped social life, if only by not providing the impetus to use the market in a 'capitalist' way (i.e. by relying on it for subsistence). Fundamentally, Pomeranz assumes that investment in increasing the productivity of land was the only option for agents, or at least the most rewarding. The very presence of the institutions he mentioned would however prove otherwise. I will indeed show that, in these commercialised regions, the institutions made available, or enforced, strategies of social reproduction which did not imply an allocation of labour in response to the market conceptualised as free. This will confirm that 'highest yield per acre' is not a useful tool to measure sustained economic growth, i.e. increase in labour productivity, given that it could also be the result of labour intensification alone and thus involution (Brenner and Isett,

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<sup>179</sup> Pomeranz is much more careful about this than Frank.

<sup>180</sup> For the sake of clarity, a note must be made on regions in Late Imperial China. Important differences existed especially between regions of interest here, that is, between the lineage-based coastal provinces of South China (Fujian and Guangdong), the Yangzi Delta, the north China plain, and Manchuria in the North East. The first two were the most commercialised regions Pomeranz alludes to. During the Qing period, they witnessed the higher rate of rent relations, in contrast to the banner estate economy of Manchuria and the smallholder peasant economy of North China.

2002; Huang, 2002), as was the case for those highly commercialised regions. I will look at the manner in which customs and institutions involved in the commercialisation acted to circumvent market forces, from the perspectives of lineages, landlords, and peasants.

In highly commercialised coastal South China regions such as Guangdong, it was tenants' uprisings and the state-backed concomitant strengthening of tenancy rights which led the landlords to invest in lineage institutions (Beattie, 1979: 128-129), in order to secure their extra-economic access to the social surplus. For the elite, lineage institutions provided a means to protect their sources of income in the forms of land and various commercial and infrastructural ventures, both against peasant resistance and other lineages. Such lineages disciplined the peasants with rent or loan payment arrears by threatening their village membership and concomitant rights, like access to village commons. Lineage feuds were common as they were a means for landlords to get access to land which could only be grabbed by force, because of the communal restrictions on the land market. Both lineage lands and markets were so vied for (Faure, 2007: 218-232). Control of the lineage market, where the peasants of the lineage had to sell, implied lucrative measures-rigging and additional fees. It also gave landlords an opportunity to bid for the lucrative tax-farming lineage involved, as it was the lineage head who was responsible for the collection of state tax on all lineage lands (Mazumdar, 1998: 241).

In all commercialised regions, including the Yangzi Delta, another way the landlords secured their income was by lending money to peasants. However, contrary to Pomeranz' claim, this was far from a signifier of productive use of land. Landlords/merchants gave loans to producers as part of the pre-emptory purchase of a predetermined quantity of crop product before the planting and harvesting (Isett, 2007: 269-270)<sup>181</sup>. It therefore prevented peasants from selling their harvest at the best market price. Landlords could also require from peasants the cultivation of specific cash-crops as rent payment (Mazumdar, 1998: 289-290). Peasants had no incentive to adopt efficient methods as they were no longer responsible for the crop after having struck the deal in either of those two situations and as

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<sup>181</sup> For examples of such practices of advanced purchases of diverse peasant's crops, see Mazumdar (1998: 323-324) on sugar cane and Pan (1995: 169-170) on hemp and wheat.



they were not in competition with other producers. Moreover, the fact that merchants were making their profit by limiting competition furthermore prevented free market impetuses to operate, as we shall see below. Consequently, contrary to the Sinology commercialisation model's assumption, peasants were not free to choose where to sell (which could have provided them with incentives to produce better goods more efficiently) either on account of their ties to the lineage market, the 'system of forward dealing', or through the landlords' imposition of cash-crop cultivation as rent payment.

For their part, peasants used the communal institutions to preserve their tenancy and ownership rights and therefore their control over their means of subsistence. However, most peasants were also bound to spend a part of their labour to produce for the market. This was due to the fact that, from the mid-Ming period onwards, smallholders faced a state tax assessed in cash, while the relation to their landlord mediated how the rent was assessed for the tenants. The peasants nevertheless persisted in cultivating an array of goods for their own consumption, as a 'safety first' strategy. They did not switch from this 'micro-level specialization' arising from extra-economic pressures to a situation which would have rendered them vulnerable to the risks of depending fully on the market to survive (Mazumdar, 1998: 406). Peasants still sought to ensure against the vicissitudes of old age by having many children, and this extra labour not absorbed in production for subsistence was used in diverse ventures, from cash-crop cultivation, household weaving, and second harvest in winter to additional spreading of fertilizer (Brenner and Isett, 2002: 637-638).

Crucially, rather than improving productivity as Pomeranz would have it, this peasants' management of household production aimed to protect the basis for self-subsistence by whatever means, however labour-intensive they might be. This paralleled landlords, merchants, and lineages' strategies deriving from, and furthering, land and labour surplus acquisition via non-market means. Considering the strategies deployed by landlords and peasants, commercialisation was therefore not based on a secure land market conducive to improvements but on bounded transactions alongside production for subsistence. This commercialisation happened through the reinforcement of, rather than despite, communal institutions.

### 2.2.2 The state and trade

Once again in agreement with the commercialisation model, Frank contends with traditional Sinology's claim that the Chinese state hindered commerce. He does so by stating that 1) the tribute-system was in fact commercial exchange in disguise, 2) trade continued despite the state's bans, and 3) the state sponsored the division of labour. The first claim has its roots in Hamashita's work. I have already demonstrated in Chapter Four that the Chinese World Order was not reducible to a mere commercial network, but it did also include this element. I have also to agree with Frank's second claim regarding the persistence of international trade despite the official bans, a now widely acknowledged fact. It is Frank's third claim which poses problems, for this is where the relation of trade to development is asserted. Frank is mostly interested in the continuing maritime trade, whatever its nature (private, illegal, or tributary), because it is a pillar of his thesis on the proportion of a country's trade within global trade determining its place within the world economy. The complex and changing nature of trade points to an important characteristic of Imperial China's commerce: the delimitation between 'public' and 'private' was a crucial instance of contestation of political power, between private agents involved in trade, including officials, and between those agents and the ruling house. This fact begs for further enquiries into the role of merchants, their social identity, the source of their profit, and their changing relation with the rulers.

I shall argue that, if there was no congenital dynastic hostility to commerce, it nonetheless did not put China on the path of a qualitative breakthrough precisely because of the relation of commerce to production. I will therefore contend with Frank's postulate that the export economy is a crucial feature of 'industrial ascendance', building on Chauduri's work to state that merchants involved in foreign trade 'intervened directly in industrial production' (Frank, 1998: 166, 212). I argue that this is not enough to assume a non-conflictual relation between merchants and the state on the grounds that the Chinese state interfered less in the economy than in Europe, except for promoting competition, and that Chinese commercial taxes were low, as the California School and more broadly Sinology's commercialisation model postulate. Such a model merely turns around the traditional 'Rise of the West'

narratives, according to which the European commercial economy proved better than the Chinese agrarian order. According to this new Sinology, it was such a Chinese focus on land taxation and providing of exchange infrastructure which allowed trade to naturally develop. On the contrary, I will demonstrate that, like the impact of international trade, the input of the Chinese polity in inter-regional specialisation followed a characteristically pre-modern pattern.

The Chinese domestic institutions fostered, according to Frank, by international trade (guilds, money-shops, etc.) were inherently inimical to sustained growth. I have already shown that a Chinese free market at the local level was a chimera; free competition at a higher level of the merchant hierarchy is one as well. The organisation of Chinese merchants within guilds and the multiplicity of intermediaries precluded a trickle-down effect from international trade to the production realm. From the guilds monopolising trade with the West through its *hong* merchants to similarly licensed brokerage firms at the provincial level (*yahang*), to unlicensed smaller brokers acting as middlemen in standard markets (*jingji*) and the diversity of itinerant merchants (*keshang*) linking county markets to village markets where local merchants (*zuoshang*) interacted with the producers or landlords, all made their profit by limiting competition, fixing prices and monopolising certain markets by sectors of trade activity or regions (Mazumdar, 1998: 302-312; Mann, 1987). Since merchants made their profit this way, they also reinvested their money in these market limitations. Higher profits were not created by investing in more efficient production (something those with capital could not do because of the peasant household base of production), but through politically-constituted price differentials through the use of monopsonies and monopolies. Merchants did also invest in land<sup>182</sup> but their strategies did not differ from those of landlords that I have outlined above. Despite a discourse condemning astounding profit-making by merchants, the Chinese rulers relied on their associations to supervise trade regulations and collect taxes<sup>183</sup>. So even if Frank is right in

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<sup>182</sup> Frank and Pomeranz make this argument to prove the relation between trade and production, but other scholars like Wong (1997) would disagree and maintain that merchants and landed elites remained distinct, on the basis that the Confucian gentry elite was selected purely on a meritocratic basis.

<sup>183</sup> The state was nevertheless also in competition for revenues with these guilds whose members sought degrees (more often than not by purchasing them or taking advantage of the special examinations for

denouncing the myth of the inimicality of the Chinese state to trade and merchants, it does however not follow that the social power the dynasty allowed them was ‘economic’ and conducive to profit-maximising strategies according to capitalist criteria. The only way capital originating from international demand influenced Chinese production was by inducing the privileging of certain crops at a given time. As stated above, international capital influenced Chinese production not by inducing an optimisation of the production process but through the system of forward dealing. This brought only micro-level specialisation within peasant households with extra labour but far from more efficient production or abandonment of subsistence production. Contrary to Frank’s statement, the effects of inter-regional specialisation and division of labour induced by foreign trade were thus very limited, a subject I turn to next.

International trade and its link to cash-crop cultivation is only one part of the massive quantity of Chinese trade during the period of commercialisation. The dynamics behind the imperial promotion of regional trade within China identified by Frank should also be questioned. Frank draws here on a wider literature in Sinology emphasising the uniqueness of the Chinese state’s involvement in grain circulation. This involvement is often associated with Confucian benevolence (Will and Wong, 1991; Wong, 1997), but others (e.g. Marks, 1998) have sought to link inter-regional trade through specialisation to intensive growth, as Frank does. I will argue that far from being a result of the silver influx and a proof of economic dynamism, regional specialisation within China occurred because of the limits of extensive growth based on labour intensification and territorial expansion. The Qing involvement in the economy (through expansion of arable land, transport of agriculture, grain redistribution<sup>184</sup>, etc.) was certainly impressive and did permit long-term growth. This was albeit one sustained by a ‘Malthusean-Ricardian type of agricultural expansion’ (Isett, 2007: 13).

To elucidate China’s inter-regional trade, we first have to understand why peasants turned

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merchants which had higher rates of success) in order to avoid tax. They even hereditarily passed their licences on to their next of kin (Mazumdar, 1998: 245-246, 315-316, 320).

<sup>184</sup> Over time, merchants carved out a more important place within the grain circulation but they still made their profits according to the extra-economic strategies outlined above.

to production for the market. As noted above, this was partially due to the landlords' exerting pressure in favour of cash-crop cultivation. Another factor derived from high population growth combined with partible inheritance. The resulting land subdivision led to smaller and smaller plots which increasingly became insufficient to ensure the peasants' subsistence. At the same time, many plots became too small to absorb all the available labour of the household, and some was consequently channelled into proto-industry, even though the returns were lower than in agricultural work (Isett, 2007: 213). This tendency occurred in regions where families settled early, as in the North China plain, Yangzi delta and Liangnan, which faced grain shortages from the 18th Century onwards. The core of inter-regional commerce consisted of grains and soy-beans (used as fertilizer) produced in relatively newly settled Manchuria, middle Yangzi, and Taiwan (so regions with higher land/labour ratios) being exchanged for clothes produced within the 'cores'. As illustrated by Isett, the Manchu expansion of Chinese territories was thus a necessary condition of the possibility of long-term growth because it allowed the production of grain surpluses in 'peripheries' which could be channelled to 'cores' with grain deficits. So Frank is right in pointing to the importance of a regional division of labour within China; however, the reason it was crucial to the Chinese economy was not because of its fostering of a Smithian pattern of growth, but because it delayed Malthusian crises.

Contrary to Frank's (1998: 160-162) assumptions, Chinese peasants did not choose to cultivate given crops because of the international demand, thereby responding to market signals encouraging them to allocate their labour more efficiently. They did so to preserve their grip on land, which implied either growing specific crops in order to meet to their landlords' requests or to be able to pay the state's tax in cash, or devoting their extra labour to proto-industry in order to survive on their small plot (Huang, 1990: 102). Commodity-production never displaced production for subsistence; it was rather done for the very aim of perpetuating it.

### 2.2.3 The Late Imperial China continuity

Finally, I will demonstrate that Frank implicitly abides by the 'dynastic cycle paradigm', from which the California School also has generally done little to dissociate itself. Its

understanding of Late Imperial China is indeed one of steady economic and demographic growth disturbed only by short dynastic transitions. The core argument of Frank, the California School, and Sinology's commercialisation model is that Chinese political institutions did not impede its economic development. A theory of the Chinese polity is however absent from their model, because of its very premises. Beyond giving a minimal position to the state, these authors actually only define it by what it does not do. Authority relations have no role in their theorisation because the state is conceived as operating in another realm than the economic one, as production and commerce are dissociated from the means of political domination. By this theoretical move, these authors complemented the dominant model in Sinology: 'gentry studies'. 'Gentry studies' are characterised by a focus on state-society relations, in which the fiercer debates revolve mostly around which side, either the state or local elites, was predominant in any given period<sup>185</sup>. Contributions to these debates are characterised by a narrow definition of political power, since the motivation of agents to have a share of it remains non-elucidated. This view is possible only due to the assumption of the logically and historically distinct realms in which the 'political' and the 'economic' are assumed to remain.

I do not wish to repeat the critiques already addressed to this paradigm in Chapter Four. However, the reliance of the commercialisation model on the assumptions of 'gentry studies' offers a good springboard to criticise their common adherence to a wider paradigm which they both belong to: the 'dynastic cycles paradigm'. It seems paradoxical for scholars like Frank, Pomeranz, and Wong aiming to overcome Eurocentrism to subscribe to the common prejudice of the 'unchanging China'. This will however remain the case as

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<sup>185</sup> For sake of clarity, it must be noted that what the term gentry encompassed produces by no means a consensus among those studying Late Imperial China. There is usually a distinction between lower- and upper-gentry. *Shengyuan* held only a district degree, whilst provincial (*juren*) and metropolitan (*jinshi*) degrees paved the road to office-holding. Such degrees conferred a gentry status to the family of the degree-holder and, during the Ming, multiple privileges to all its members (later on restricted by the Qing rulers). *Shengyuan* multiplied for this reason during the Ming period. The gentry accumulated land at the same time, but those degree-holding landlords can be differentiated from commoner landlords. As stated in Chapter Four, for my part, unless whilst discussing 'gentry studies', I will generally use the terms landed elite or landlords for all those engaged in exploitation of tenants, whether they held a degree or not and, more specific for Late Imperial China, whether they were also involved in commercial activities. This is because, on the one hand, I consider degree- and office-holding a strategy among others open to this class and, on the other hand, the Ming-Qing reigns witnessed the merging of commercial activities, degree-holding, and land management (through lineage in the South).

long as they avoid recognising the imbrications of domination and exploitation dynamics in pre-modern societies. It is indeed alongside these tensions that social conflicts unfolded in Late Imperial China, between and among the ‘gentry’ (whether we understand by this the officials or the landlords), merchants, the ruling elite and the producers. This is the non-problematisation of the competition among the former groups for the social surplus produced by the peasantry, as well as the renewed strategies of the latter to resist this exploitation, which explains how these Californian Scholars can think of the ‘political’ and the ‘economic’ as ships passing in the night. The picture that emerges is one of an enduring Chinese state preoccupied by raising revenue and preserving a stable social order whose role as a mere extra could enable commercial activities to flourish in parallel. This conception of a benevolent and enlightened benign Confucian order, which even ‘alien’ (Mongol and Manchu) regimes must adopt to govern the Chinese society, must be deconstructed in order to reveal the social negotiations around the power balance this order embodied in the different and always contested institutionalisations of compromises between these aforementioned classes.

Wong (1997) also abides by the dynastic cycles paradigm by postulating that, within each cycle, the elite was relatively powerless and pleased to collaborate with the state’s Confucian agenda. This gentry’s submissiveness is assumed to rest upon its inability to reproduce its power over generations because of the absence of primogeniture, i.e. the Chinese family practice to divide property equally amongst the sons (e.g. Fairbank and Goldman, 2006: 21). Wakefield (1998) has however powerfully dismissed this myth of unhampered property fragmentation. Chinese elite families indeed had many legal and customary means to ensure their property against this division process, from lineage trusts to commercial ventures<sup>186</sup>. This illustrates the need to conceptualise how property was politically constituted in order to understand different social features of Imperial China, from waves of commercialisation and long-term impact of patterns of inheritance on property preservation to the different ‘internal’ and ‘external’ articulations of the ‘Confucian state’.

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<sup>186</sup> See also Bossler (1998) for such an argument on the Song period.

I argue for establishing stronger relations between patterns of commercialisation and ‘elite dominance’ through focusing on changing social property relations in order to make sense of the conflicts between the ruling house and the ‘gentry’. This is something which remains out of reach of both the commercialisation model and gentry studies which assume, within the dynastic cycles paradigm, that gentry power was growing over the course of Late Imperial China and over the course of each reign. Introducing the variable of the producers, i.e. asking over what did the rulers and gentry contend (beyond ‘dominance’ for the sake of it), demonstrates that state/gentry relations institutionalised different forms of re-alienation and re-privatisation of political power. This crucially differentiated the Qing from the Ming period, after the impact of the successful peasants’ revolts and the shaking off of their dependant status and assertion of their claims to land. Commercial activities remained nonetheless at the center of Ming and Qing exploitation practices, which accommodated different institutions of property and labour as politically constituted forms of power which were at the core of contestations among and within classes. Both periods involved a ‘local’ fusion of domination and exploitation which circumvented rather than embraced the free market. The ruling house and the gentry did so by enforcing different rights over the objects of their competition: labour and land. The power of the landed elite had changed in relation to producers by the end of the Ming, and in consequence a different relation with the dynastic power was institutionalised. This was embodied in varying imperial rhetorics towards gentry and merchants, a subject to which we have to turn next.

### **3. A phenomenology of China’s economy through *minsheng* management**

In the works abiding by the commercialisation model, it is assumed that the Chinese state and classes remained more or less the same during the Late Imperial period and did not affect economic growth and trade. I have already demonstrated that the conceptual vocabulary used by rulers and official historians in their implementation of the Mandate of Heaven (both over its population and ‘external’ actors) mirrored the social relations in which the state was contested (simultaneously from ‘within’ and ‘without’), and existed as



a product of the enforcement of dynastic politics<sup>187</sup>. Here I want to ground in social property relations and conflicts around power the imperial rhetoric toward moral order that traditional Sinology takes for granted. For this, I will analyse the imperial discourse on peasants, ‘gentry-merchants’, and Chineseness.

Late Imperial China’s ideology revolved around an important ‘commitment’, to borrow Wong’s (1997: 92-93) term, to provide for popular welfare, as embodied in the notion of *minsheng*. Although it was a recurrent commitment throughout Imperial history, *minsheng* was particularly put in the forefront of imperial discourse during the Qing reign. The widely recognised benevolence of the Qing polity was expressed in its ‘enlightened’ policies geared toward low taxation, the protection of tenancy rights and the free status of the peasantry<sup>188</sup>, and its promotion of inter-regional grain trade and granaries. This Confucian discourse must be seen as having been enabled by the smallholder economy the Qing rulers found themselves faced with (in consequence of the peasants’ gains following the 17<sup>th</sup> Century uprisings), and as being enforced in order to lessen the competition over land and labour with the landed elite.

Promoting popular welfare indeed meant political access to the control of social surplus extraction, or shares in its redistribution. It involved consolidating rights to ‘economic’ exploitation through political, symbolic, military, and juridical means of domination. This was true for the Qing central policies aimed at the protection of the basis for taxation, but also for officials, lineages, and even merchants who all contended for, and benefitted from, the administration of benevolence. The Qing rulers did ‘enlist the help’ of landed elites and merchants who thus ‘participated in extending the reach of state power and authority’; it was however not because in China ‘notions of class did not matter’ (Wong, 1997: 107) but

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<sup>187</sup> The office-state and the tribute-system were equally prominent in Late Imperial China, and the imperial ideology which spawned from them is equally instructive on the blurring of the ‘economic’ and extra-economic power and of the distinction between the ‘domestic’ and the ‘international’ during this period. However, as I have theoretically discussed this topic in Chapter Four, I will not rehearse this here and leave the analysis of these two important socio-political institutions for the Yuan-Ming-Qing period to the next chapter.

<sup>188</sup> Among such particular policies figure: the codification of peasants’ gains during their 17<sup>th</sup> Century rebellions; the ‘never raise tax’ edict of 1713; the tax waiving for peasants opening new land; and the ban on landlords’ rights to exercise private justice over their tenants following the abolition of status differentiation.

precisely because they did.

*Minsheng* involved the state's undertaking of the responsibility to ensure popular welfare, but others competed for a share of the political power this task involved. Traditionally, *minsheng* was implemented through provincial and local offices. It was contended for because officialdom was based on accepted corruption governing the alienation and privatisation of parts of public authority. Certainly, provincial tax quotas were set by the center and salaried officials remitted those quotas through the taxes they collected locally. However, amongst the panoply of ways they used their status to personally accumulate revenues, these officials were informally allowed to raise diverse surcharges and fees to 'complement' their incomes (their salaries being notoriously very low) and recruit clerks who were undertaking the officials' tasks. According to the Ming and Qing legal codes, corruption was a 'private offense' committed by an official which involved a search for private gain (Parks, 1997)<sup>189</sup>. Such offenses encompassed the officials' customary fees and surcharges mentioned above (the collecting of extra money beyond the fixed quotas), as well as gifts between officials (which implicitly referred to exchanges of favours). However, in imperial and officials' administrative memos and debates, such informal surcharges and the officials' gift giving culture were pragmatically accepted as necessary to provide for the officials' means of administration and to foster 'social harmony'<sup>190</sup>. Consequently, there were always debates on how to differentiate between 'a conventional "gift" and a corrupting "bribe" ' and on 'how much was too much' regarding customary fees (Parks, 1997: 979, 981; see also Will in Kreike and Jordan, 2004). However, since such corruption had always eschewed any definite method of assessment whilst at the same time being at the heart of informal practices, and because all officials could be prosecuted on

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<sup>189</sup> I exclude here frauds, forgery, scams, and impersonations. See McNicholas (2007, 2013) on this. I also exclude extortions (also discussed in Parks, 1997). All these offenses were not systematically prosecuted, for diverse reasons, similarly to the corruption discussed here. They however need to be discussed as a distinct topic as they were not as informally accepted within rulership and officialdom as were customary fees and gifts.

<sup>190</sup> Officials' 'private' and 'public' expenses were undifferentiated. Officials' salaries were insufficient to provide for this, but also for provincial and imperial *ad hoc* emergency requests and customary gifts to superiors. Provincial officials relied on those, notably for their 'personal' expenses of imperative prestige apparatus (e.g. in matters of lifestyle, clothing, and imperial tribute to remit to the emperor). See Parks (1993). On the issue of customary fees as a widespread informal practice, see Zelin (1992).

these grounds - generally for political motives as part of struggles within the elite – in practice almost none were (Parks, 1997).

Those traditionally entitled to participate in the administration of *minsheng* sought to monopolise such political privileges. The gentry's uneasiness in sharing the benefits of implementing *minsheng* can be illustrated by its resistance to newcomers. Virtue was discursively used to justify the gentry's entitlement to its position and exclude others, especially merchants who sought to enter the administration of *minsheng* upon their growing importance in the commercialised economy. Officials indeed opposed the appointment of members of the 'commercial classes' through the new means available to them: 'gentry-merchants' were viewed as one source of the deterioration of virtue within officialdom. Merchants invested in the building of Confucian private academies (e.g. the Donglin Academy) and literati coteries (e.g. the Restoration society) as a way to secure success in examinations in order to get gentry status and the privileges it implied (Wakeman, 1998)<sup>191</sup>.

There was however an easier way to acquire rights to benevolence. The right to implement *minsheng* also could be purchased, in the form of degrees, official positions, and promotions. Office venality was a legal, codified, and accepted enterprise with a systematised and widespread character under the 'system of contributions' begun in the early Ming and which acquired further importance during Qing reigns (Kaske, 2008, 2012; Marsh, 1962; McNicholas, 2007; Zhang, 2010). These purchases were nonetheless wrapped into the moral order rhetoric by being portrayed as 'contributions' to public works or relief measures within a system through which commoners could in this way prove their worthiness of gentry status. The Late Imperial China dynasties employed gentry through tax-farming for the *lijia* tax collection (during the Ming), and sold to the highest bidders the right to collect tax amongst the militarised lineage gentry and guild merchants (during the Qing) who wished to participate in the Confucian order as a politically constituted entitlement to surplus extraction.

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<sup>191</sup> It thus reveals their pursuit of *si* (private interest) despite their very ideological claim being to curtail this *si* affecting officialdom, amidst the Ming factionalist struggles.

Officialdom was of course a lucrative avenue to ‘care for the people’, but so was participation in the grain redistribution which was crucially needed due to the grain deficits mentioned in the previous section. The imperial rhetoric toward trade varied during the Ming and Qing reigns<sup>192</sup>. Regarding the grain circulation undertaken by merchants, the Qing rulers went from stating that ‘to harm the merchants is to harm the people’ to qualifying them as ‘treacherous and traitorous’, depending on ‘the relative alignment of merchant behaviour with bureaucratic interests’ (Isett, 2007: 251). Outsourcing this task meant partially privatising *minsheng* and state power, by including merchants in the surplus redistribution chain; discipline by the rulers was at times needed to limit the merchants’ increased squeezing of peasants.

Equally ambiguous was the official rhetoric toward international trade. This brings further illustrations of the anachronism of using the modern vocabulary of internal/external and public/private distinctions to understand Late Imperial China: those ‘dimensions’ were rather used in unique combinations to enforce control over shares of political power. Although remaining the same individuals, traders and the landed elite engaging in commerce were sometimes praised and taxed, and sometimes portrayed as a threat being externalised as *wokou* (Japanese bandits). Officials recognised that they were the same (Chinese) people under different regulative circumstances<sup>193</sup>, but nonetheless used this term connoting barbarians outside the tribute system over the one for ‘sea bandit’, *haizei* (Reid, 2010:17-19). Particularly prominent in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Century during the Ming trade ban<sup>194</sup>, these Chinese pirates were deeply intertwined with local gentries (Chin, 2010; Lorge, 2005: 126-127; Mazumdar, 1988: 66-75). An (illegal) Chinese militarised maritime empire under the control of the Zheng merchant family appeared in Taiwan during those

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<sup>192</sup> An example relevant to imperial ideology toward promotion of trade which is sometimes used by proponents of the commercialisation model to illustrate proto-industrialisation is the ‘men plow and women weave’ doctrine, whereas I would contend that this demonstrates instead the household base of commodity production.

<sup>193</sup> Reid (2010:17) quotes a Ming official: ‘When trade is permitted, pirates become merchants. When trade is prohibited, merchants convert to pirates’.

<sup>194</sup> Those official bans were mostly proclaimed from 1371 to 1567, but they were also periodically reasserted afterwards.

years, and the Ming faced with the Manchu threat had to concede to them later the (legal) rulership of all Fujian. These ‘Ming loyalists’ would be crushed by the Qing only in 1683, the later continuing the maritime ban until then in order to isolate the Zheng empire. From that point onwards, the Qing rulers were playing on the blurred lines of ‘private’ and ‘public’ trade according to their interests. For example, during tense relations with Japan, they encourage private trade instead of missions (thus ‘allowing the people to earn their living’) but when specific goods were needed (e.g. copper) they financed private traders and brought them to the status of ‘state merchants’ (Mazumdar, 1988: 95-99).

*Minsheng* was enforced according to the balance of class forces and was thus unevenly spread geographically and temporally. In coastal provinces of South China, during the Qing period, the landed elite managed over time to partially usurp this ‘responsibility’ through the institution of lineage. One area where *minsheng* was not implemented during the Qing reign was Manchuria. In order to consolidate its power, the Conquest Elite was willing to borrow the Chinese ideology (and govern through it in China proper) insofar as it remained compatible with the preservation of the Manchu culture. Manchu military distinctiveness became associated with its geographic origin, ethnic purity and hunting skills beyond enduring martial preparedness *per se* (Isett, 2007: 24-27). The special status of Manchuria during the Qing reigns was cast in those terms but this geographically-anchored Manchu ethos also reveals the role of Manchuria as serving as imperial patrimony to reward noble followers and military units. The northeast was beyond the reach of *minsheng*, a zone of manorialism and servitude unlike China proper where such practices were abolished.

The Yuan territory was as unevenly governed as the Qing’s. The cultural tolerance and ability for acculturation the Mongols were praised for (Chua, 2008) meant that parts of the Great Yuan *ulus* were under the aegis of *minsheng*, while others were governed along the lines of earlier Mongol traditions of rulership. Such ‘steppe practices’ were notably visible in the appanages (akin to the Manchu elite lands) or in the Yuan extended realm of influence (e.g. Koryo and Tibet) indirectly governed through a ‘Eurasian elite created by the Mongol empire’ (Robinson, 2009: 8-9). The Mongol appanages preserved a source of power for the Mongol elite who had been granted such princely lands, following the

Mongol ideology according to which the empire as a joint patrimony belongs to the extended ruling family. This might be cast in specific terms by ‘alien’ rulers, but this is not foreign either to proper ‘Chinese’ dynastic founders’s practice of rewarding their family and conquest elite with such personal basis of power<sup>195</sup>.

Studying ‘alien’ rules might in fact reveal more parallels with ‘Chinese’ rules than oppositions, despite the common assumptions of national historiographies from states formerly attached to the Mongol empire. In such studies, enforcement of rules is understood as exclusively belonging to ‘alien invasions’, but this provides for a springboard to illustrate its occurring in dynastic politics as well. Diverging interests between the Qing Manchu elite and the bureaucracy, between the Ming imperial rulers and the gentry, or between the Yuan Mongol nobles, the wider Mongol empire politics and the *nanren*<sup>196</sup> have to be recognised and understood as similar instances of competition over property and people taking different forms. Overall, we have to acknowledge the duality of ‘foreign’ rules in China and their cultural manifestations, but that they also had proper ‘Chinese’ counterparts which were as specific and, more importantly, as illustrative of the pre-modern character of Late Imperial China’s merging of the ‘domestic’ and ‘international’, the ‘political’ and ‘economic’, and the ‘public’ and ‘private’.

In short, *sui generis* political orders cast within specific ideologies were dependent on the outcomes of socio-political conflicts and shaped by opportunistic strategies. These orders cannot be captured as merely being the result of general trends of dynastic cycles in an overall static evolution through Confucian benevolence. A modern conception of the state, whether explicitly expressed or brought by conceiving it as embodying a realm distinct from logics of exploitation, must thus be set aside for the Eurocentric anachronisms it implies. Enquiring into the conceptual vocabularies used in specific contexts reveals this, as will the next chapter’s comparison between continental Europe’s ‘enlightened’ Absolutist states and Confucian China governed through its unique form of benevolence, i.e. *minsheng*.

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<sup>195</sup> This is attested for example by the Ming creation of eighteen hereditary princedoms.

<sup>196</sup> This ethnic division of the population under the Yuan dynasty referred to the inhabitants of South China.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have challenged both the picture of Late Imperial China offered by traditional Sinology, in which China is seen as caught in cyclical patterns of stagnation, and with the portrayal given by the new Sinology, according to which China, due to its commercialised economy, was comparable with Europe taken as a singular and homogenous entity. For this, I have made three main empirical points which run counter to the California School's findings: there was no 'efficient' market in land, labour, and products; commercial relations were politicised; and 'state-gentry' relations varied according to the balance of class powers. This emphasises my different anti-Eurocentric strategy. The California School feels compelled to affirm that China was 'as good' as Europe in terms of the key element indicative, according to them, of 'development': the non-interference of political institutions in the 'economy', i.e. trade and market exchange. I contend that this is still a Eurocentric analysis because it derives from an ontology based on the experiences of European modernity. I propose instead a reconstruction of the social rationality specific to Late Imperial China whilst critically interrogating the parallel assumption that there was such a non-interference of political institutions in the 'economy' in continental Europe.

Frank's thesis relies on a series of indicators to make the case for China's superiority during the 1400-1800 period and partakes thus in the wider commercialisation model in Sinology. However, indicators such as those derived from the international balance of trade must be used with caution for the pre-capitalist era, both for Europe and for Asia. According to Frank's argument, China's monetised economy was highly productive and international economic exchange only augmented this. It rests on a series of problematic assumptions based on the universalisation of the distinctions between the economic/political and inside/outside in societies where such distinctions did not exist empirically – assumptions at the heart of Eurocentric analytical anachronisms. Frank's comprehension of Late Imperial China's economy therefore runs parallel to, rather than contradicts, the state/society relations model of 'gentry studies' and the 'dynastic cycle paradigm'. In opposition to these views I argue that understanding the role of silver imports requires

unravelling how its access and use was politicised. Trade also has to be conceptualised as a social practice enmeshed with other strategies the ‘gentry’ used to reproduce its position. Fundamentally we need to evaluate how the producers were affected (if at all) by the international market. In the end, this reveals that the modern concern of increasing productivity was not on these social agents’ agendas, given the social context they found themselves in. If it was always present in one form or another, commerce did not mean the same thing for social agents throughout the history of mankind. Recognising the anchoring of agents’ behaviours in their relations to social institutions precludes the Eurocentric assumption that the way they were organised under European modernity is a transhistorical given. In Imperial China, commerce linked a series of actors in relations which are not easily revealed without enquiring into its specific social property regimes. Socialising rationality this way is a core component of any anti-Eurocentric method.

The Chinese polity did promote trade to a certain extent, but it did so in ways and for reasons Frank cannot comprehend given his method and his reliance upon the commercialisation model. Understanding imperial ideology in terms of a political economy of the implementation of *minsheng* reveals social conflicts around power in which power is conceptualised as political access to land and people. *Minsheng* was a *sui generis* construct of Chinese politics, as were the conceptions of the ‘state’ and its relation to other polities – the latter were embodied in the office-state and tribute-system being passed within the Heavenly Mandate to those being able to implement this order. Parallels with European politics can however be traced by deconstructing what such conceptual vocabularies meant in terms of specific social property relations and how they expressed conflicts around the extraction and redistribution of social surplus. This is what I will endeavour to do in the next chapter, after having further substantiated my conception of the history of Late Imperial China until the time of what has been called by the California School the ‘Great Divergence’.



## **Chapter Seven – Reconstructing the History of Late Imperial China until the ‘Great Divergence’**

This chapter resumes the historical reconstruction of China's socio-economic development in geopolitical context, informed by PM, from 1279 to the late 18th Century. Its main conclusion is that, contrary to what much of the anti-Eurocentric literature in IR, HS, and Comparative Economic History argues on the case of Late Imperial China, the polity's overall long-term trajectory during this period showed remarkable similarities to 'Europe's' pre-19th Century experience, beyond the parity in living standards alleged by the California School. These similarities are visible in three fields: economics/social, politics/state, and geopolitics/military. Conflicting strategies of social reproduction not dissimilar to those in Europe pitched peasants, landlords, merchants, and the ruling house against and amongst each other, and this governed the equally changing 'economic' landscape of China over time in terms of relations to land and property and patterns of commercialisation. The 'political' nature of the elites' strategies in their competition for producers' surpluses means the Chinese 'state' was just as much contested for as it was in Europe, and was therefore far from embodying a stable and unchanging Confucian order. If there was no 'China' as a coherent entity motivated by *gong* (public good), it was likewise not governed through *wen* (civil – opposed to military): as in Europe, geopolitics was both an arena of competition and accumulation which made frontiers and polities particularly unstable since it was land and people that were contended for. This means that the timing and the causes of China's supposed economic parity, or even superiority, over and against 'Europe' - as much of the recent anti-Eurocentric revisionist literature argues - need to be re-assessed. This re-assessment will proceed by centering the analysis on the relations between social-property-relations, contested authority relations, and wider geopolitical relations in order to de-reify and properly historicise the Chinese trajectory.

The chapter suggests that Imperial China's geopolitical relations within the wider East-Asian international context were as contested, bellicose, and militarised as late medieval and early modern geopolitical relations in the nascent European inter-state system were. This challenges the thesis made by Realist and English School authors that China, conceptualised as a homogeneous and unified 'imperial actor', stabilised and pacified the

East-Asian international sub-system to the extent that its actors prioritised (internally and externally) status and social harmony over European-like competition for wealth and power. It also challenges the parallel thesis, made by the California School, that China's specific geopolitical organisation enabled an economic breakthrough to sustained growth driven by imperial pacification. In this original twist of the neo-Weberian narrative, China's diverging ideological, political, and geopolitical organisation made for comparatively steadier and unhindered market expansion, until in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when unintended consequences of the disadvantageous path of 'competition from within and from without' interfered with this. Furthermore, I argue that, just as Europe's early modern, multi-actor character was not a sufficient condition for Europe's economic 'take-off', we should not expect that China's geopolitical position within this bellicose sub-system could *ipso facto* have led to either military-strategic parity with, or superiority over, 'the West' due to, as some neo-Weberians argue, pressures towards military investment and commercialisation.

This argument therefore directly challenges the prevailing IR literature and the, primarily neo-Weberian-inspired, historical-sociological body of work on Late Imperial China. In summary, this literature argues that Late Imperial China diverged in being eminently stable due to, (1) spatial ordering principles (in IR), and/or, (2) ideological/political commitments (in HS). These variables are deemed so important as to explain China's alleged coherence as a unit (political centralisation), East Asian geopolitical stability (territorial integration), and their steadily flourishing economies (exchanges and commercialisation) over half a millennium.

These arguments have direct implications for the debate on the transition or non-transition to capitalism or sustained growth in China in the fields of comparative economic history and world history. Here, I will return especially to Pomeranz' thesis, which locates the 'Great Divergence' between the 'East' and the 'West' not in the 16th Century, but defers it to the 19th Century. I will contest his argument that, prior to the 19th Century, China was wealthier and more advanced than 'Europe', partly on empirical grounds, and partly on conceptual grounds. I have already discussed the problems with Pomeranz' empirical claims about Chinese development, especially regarding the discrepancies between what

his theoretical model expects of agents' behaviour (specialisation and innovation) and empirical data (e.g. increase in labour productivity), and his actual description of economic patterns (namely labour intensification). Here I am interested in further demonstrating how it is the California School's basis for comparison (Yangzi Delta/England and China/Europe) which misleads these authors, both regarding the origins of modern development and the (geo)political divergence. I will argue that we should instead compare Late Imperial China and continental Europe with each other and in opposition to England.

Accordingly, throughout this chapter I argue that the generic comparison between 'East' and 'West' - China and Europe - relies (with a few exceptions) on the false assumption that early modern 'Europe' constituted a coherent and self-evident socio-political category of analysis. I argue that this represents an erroneous starting-point, obscuring the very different patterns of social, economic, political, and military development that prevailed within and between Europe's various polities. England stood-out within Europe as the only place experiencing an increase in labour productivity and overcoming Malthusian crises due to the emergence of capitalist social property relations in the countryside from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century onwards. This PM analysis crucially overcomes in this way any *Euro-centrism*, forsaking the assumption of unique and inherent characteristics to Europe in favour of an understanding of the 'Great Divergence' of *England* as an outcome of socio-political conflicts, rather than as a contingent (the California School) or pre-destined (the 'Rise of the West' narratives) event. I argue that such recasting of politics and geopolitics at the level of social agency is imperative for an analysis which is both anti-Eurocentric and sociologically convincing.

However, the anti-Eurocentric potential of PM has not been fully developed yet, as its progress in moving beyond the sociology of the West has mostly been done in response to diverse findings of proto-modern features in the 'East', and through the strategy of highlighting the non-development of non-western polities and empires when compared to the already capitalist Britain (Brenner and Isett, 2002; Wood, 2003)<sup>197</sup>. Pre-existing PM analyses of China have taken the form of demonstrating how Qing China's Malthusian-

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<sup>197</sup> But see Hoffman (2008) for an example of a PM analysis of a non-Western power which does not subscribe to this usual practice.

Ricardian dynamics were antithetical to Britain's Smithian development. Although providing important insights on Qing agrarian (Isett, 2007) and commercial (Mazumdar, 1997) relations, these studies do not sufficiently draw out the approach's potential for innovative problematising and politicising of socio-spatial relations and authority relations. Widening the comparison can show not only that Imperial China and European continental powers were likewise locked in pre-modern patterns, but also that Chinese agents deployed a wide and original repertoire of strategies of empire management and resistances.

The period covered starts with the Mongol conquest of China and the establishment of the Yuan dynasty in 1279, retraces the reign of the 'native' Ming, and ends in 1786, i.e. the conclusion of the Qianlong reign which marked the pinnacle of the Manchu Qing Empire. During that time, China was crucially re-mapped. Only the Ming governed mainly what was considered the previous traditional Chinese territory, i.e. the central and southern region around the Yangzi delta. In its restricted sense (i.e. without considering its linkage to the broader Mongol Empire), the Yuan dynasty ruled over much more territory than the Song at its zenith, incorporating regions to its North, South, and West (notably Annam, Liao territories, and the province of Yunnan), whilst its indirect rule extended into Korea and Tibet. The Qing Empire drastically expanded westwards and controlled roughly what is contemporary China, plus Mongolia, Manchuria, and Taiwan. To make sense of Late Imperial China's history, we must go beyond the narratives of an expansion of China - albeit punctuated by hiatuses - towards its 'natural' boundaries, and socially problematise the political geography of Imperial China.

To this end, this chapter proceeds in two broad steps, beginning with a historical reconstruction of Late Imperial China's history, before undertaking its comparison with Europe. In this first step, I will pay particular attention to the transformations of the office-system, the tribute-system, class relations, and imperial ideology in order to highlight how differences in the governance of territories were grounded in conflicts over land and people which must be understood as property conflicts. Although following the traditional division in terms of dynastic eras, my analysis will emphasis long-term patterns developing across dynasties, such as transformations of the relations to land and property, commercialisation

and proto-industrialisation, and privatisation of authority. I will first retrace the particularity of Yuan rule of China. I will argue that although uniquely grounded in typically Mongolian institutions and imperial project, this dynasty witnessed conflicts around state power which were not so different to other Chinese dynasties. Section Two will cover the return to Han rule under the Ming, marked by important commercialisation patterns but whose reign ended in massive peasants' uprisings. I will demystify the perception of a peaceful Ming in its 'domestic' as well as 'international' relations. The last historical section will explain the Qing remodelling of social property relations, grounded in specific strategies of empire management which are left unexplained by the narrow framework of Sinicisation.

In this manner, the basis for a comparison with continental Europe will be set. This historical reconstruction will allow me to highlight the Eurocentrism of both, (1) the traditional comparisons which obscure the similarities in European and Chinese geopolitical environment, imperial ideologies, and strategies of social reproduction, and, (2) the belief in HS of China that there were sufficient continuities in geopolitical and state/society relations during this period to see it as representing a distinctive model. This will allow me to conclude on the impact of my historical findings and comparison for the debate on China and Britain's 'Great Divergence', which has been mostly based on de-militarising and ironing out changes in the Chinese trajectory. These two pitfalls still pervading anti-Eurocentric IR undermine their objective of de-essentialising the European trajectory as unique in world history.

## **1. Reconstructing Late Imperial China's history**

### 1.1 The Yuan dynasty

The Mongol rulership of Late Imperial China is mainly understood as an interlude. In the IR literature on China, the Mongols' attempt to govern like the Chinese is taken as proof of the centripetal force of the Chinese tribute-system or office-state (e.g. Kang, 2005: 72; Zhang and Buzan, 2012: 33). This reflects the historiographical debates in Sinology which still revolve around the topics of 'barbarian' invasions and the alienness of the dynasty. The Yuan reign is mostly conceived along the lines of an irreconcilable antagonism between the

Mongol and the Chinese ways (as in Franke and Twitchett, 1994). The Yuan dynasty could thus never manage to happily merge the feudalistic, personalised, autocratic/democratic<sup>198</sup> steppe legacy to the bureaucratic and centralised Chinese style. Given this nature of the debates on Yuan China and given also the lack of sources on this period, there are few, if any, social history works devoted to class relations. My main contribution will be to assess, and go beyond, the ‘Mongol Sinicisation or Chinese barbarisation’ debate by making sense of the Yuan socio-spatial specificities (relative to the administration, the rule of succession, and the inclusion in a wider empire), as well as the adapted Chinese institutions in terms of conflicts around property and power. I will argue that these elements can be compared to those of the ‘native’ dynasties, not as examples of more or less successful Sinicisation, but as part of the wider repertoire of strategies of social reproduction through the administration of Chinese territories. This will exemplify the character equally rooted in dynamics of appropriation of the alleged benevolent and peaceful political and geopolitical institutions of the ‘native’ or ‘Sinicised’ dynasties, which is held as the source of China’s departure from European trajectory.

#### 1.1.1 The conquest of China and the Mongol legacies

The steppe unification under Genghis Khan occurred from 1206<sup>199</sup> onwards. At its apex under Genghis’ successor Ogodei (1227-1246), the Mongol Empire reached from central Europe, the Russian principalities, and the Persian Empire to Northern China territories, including the initial territories of Central Asia. Genghis’ succession is worth recalling as it will influence the patterns of the geopolitical relations of Yuan China whilst shedding light on the Mongol property system which lingered on in parts of Yuan China. During his lifetime, Genghis had designated his third son to succeed him as *qa’an* (ruler of all the Mongol empire)<sup>200</sup>; he had also given Mongol homeland territories as ‘appanages’ to his

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<sup>198</sup> The institution of the *kurultai* can be seen as a form of deliberative military assembly, whereas the overall Mongol style of ruling is more often identified as overly concentrated in the hands of one or a few.

<sup>199</sup> On the emergence and consolidation of the Mongol empire, see Barfield (1989) and Di Cosmo, Frank and Golden (2009). Di Cosmo (1999) also describes the changes from Genghis’ ‘trade-tribute empire’ to Ogodei’s ‘trade-tribute-taxation empire’ to Kubilai’s ‘direct-taxation empire’.

<sup>200</sup> The term *qa’an* as ruler of the ‘*ulus* of the center’ must be differentiated from the term *khan* which refers to subordinated rulers of *khanates* as components of the wider empire. Those *khanates* will form the Il-khanate in Iraq/Iran (under the Toluid line through Hulegu), the Kipchak (under the Golden horde of the Jochid line), Yuan China (under the Toluid line through Mongke and Kubilai), and Transoxania in Central Asia

four wives' first sons. These would later form important imperial lines, i.e. Ogedei, Jochi, Chagatai, and Tolui. At that time, those territories, understood as pasturelands and subject peoples, did not conform to the later *khanates* which were later associated to these lines, and included revenues from other conquered sedentary societies belonging to the 'ulus of the center' in a complex pattern of rights<sup>201</sup>.

The Mongol rule over Chinese territories started at the time of the South Song (1126-1279), upon their take-over of the Jin polity (1125-1234), itself having made of the Song their tributary. Ogedei governed North China as part of the wider Mongol empire (through the *qa'an* and the other *ulus*' representatives) until his death in 1241, followed by Güyüg (1246-1248) and Mongke (1251-1259). Under the reign of the latter, his brother Kubilai, being responsible for the conquest of modern Yunnan as a first step in the campaign against the South Song, was already regarded as the *de facto* ruler of China (Jackson, 1999: 29). The outcomes of the following struggles for succession is what gave shape to the four khanates and put an end to the Mongol empire as a unified administration upon the accession of Kubilai to the throne after the *kurultai* of 1260 and its assertion of Toluid control over China and Iran (through his brother Hulegu) (Allsen, 2001: 52-53). This traditional steppe practice assembled all leaders for important decisions (such as succession), in which every line showed their military might to support their case. Although often portrayed as a clash between sedentary and nomad perspectives (the Toluid opponents being the Chagatai and Jochid lines ruling more indirectly over 'Russia' and Central Asia), this *khuriltai* is best viewed as a war over the contested ruling of West Asia and the apportioned lands.

### 1.1.2 Governing China

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(under the Chagatai line).

<sup>201</sup> Jackson's (1999) discoveries led to such understanding of the late formation of the well-known four *uluses* (modern day Russia, Iran/Iraq, China, and Central Asia). This system of shares or apportioned land, inherited from the 'nomad culture' (or social-property relations), endured as a 'diplomatic tool' during later wars and alliances between the *khanates* (Allsen, 2001). Conflicts between these 'second-generation *uluses*' around revenues from allotted territories also endured, notably in the war between Kubilai and Qaidu of the Chagatai khanate around hereditary rights on Caucasian territories – the war through which the Yuan dynasty eventually gained Mongolia (Hodong, 2009).

Similar strategies of social reproduction governed relations between the elites and the ruling line in China from the initial conquest of the North to the eradication of the South Song. Expansion was crucial for this. When Kubilai became *qa'an* as well as *khan* of North China, Yunnan, and Annam were already within the Mongol zone of influence, in a loose administration which kept the native rulers in place. Expansion continued, notably including the full pacification of the Korean kingdom of Koryo in the mid-1270s. The conquest of the South Song proved more difficult: it took a decade before all loyalist insurrections were tamed, in 1279. A series of demands of submission to the Mongol empire, their refusal being met with punitive expeditions, were undertaken in parallel in Japan (1268), Burma (1273), Champa (1281), and Java (1289).<sup>202</sup> The Mongols adapted to the social-property relations they encountered during their campaigns of geopolitical accumulation, providing for different avenues to reward the elite which later turned into important social conflicts once the surplus they could extract dried out.

Comprising only one third of the overall Chinese empire's population due to the devastation related to the prolonged wars, North China had already been divided into appanages conferred on Mongol nobility and military leaders, enfeoffed as princes, upon its conquest. The appanages-holders hereditarily presided over their assigned households which had a statute of boundservants, serfs, or slaves. Upon the initial conquest of the Jin, 38% of the population (in the North) was under such jurisdictions, and it averaged around 15% during Kubilai's reign – at least for those declared (Mote, 1994: 660-663). This was already a line of divide between the Mongol nobility and the ruling house, since Ogedei's reign in North China, the *de facto* ruler (albeit mostly *primus inter pares*) (Allsen, 1994).

The social surplus the Mongol nobility so extracted from its peasants was reinvested with the *ortoy*. Those Muslim merchants funnelled the Mongol money into maritime and caravan trade. They also used it for money-lending to individuals and for tax-farming with local government offices, under diverse bureaus and lesser related offices (Endicott-West, 1994: 599-600). Those communities were already involved in trade partnerships with the

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<sup>202</sup> Only Burma and Champa had to resort to giving tribute to Kubilai.



Mongols since earlier Genghid conquests (Allsen, 1989). The *Pax mongolica* had indeed favoured the establishment of trade routes across the Eurasian landmass, a lucrative activity to tax for the Mongols who also invested through these commercial agents. Kubilai partly succeeded in diminishing the arbitrary rule of the appanage-holders and their private levies, by imposing instead (on top of the *corvée* services) annual grain and head taxes to be remitted to the center and then divided with the nobility, but this remained an important source of conflict even during his reign (Endicott-West, 1999: 90-93).

The Mongols reproduced their social position through annual imperial grants (according to the principle of allotment to princely lines, here originating from South Song conquered territories), annual revenues from the appanages, and joint commercial ventures, but also from the official position of *daruyaci* and its designed official lands. The *daruyaci* was part of the system of dual-staffing imposed on all Yuan territories (in parallel to the usual Chinese-style office-system). It was a hereditary position due to the adaptation of the *yin* privilege<sup>203</sup>, a position first won through participation in military campaigns or service in the Imperial guard (Endicott-West, 1999: 65, 75). Such offices were mostly reserved for Mongols through the system of ethnic classification. During the Yuan dynasty, the population was divided in this manner between the Mongols, the *semu* (Western Central and Inner Asians), the Han (people from North China and Manchuria), and the *nanren* (inhabitants of South China)<sup>204</sup>.

The central regime extracted its revenues partly from South China where there was continuity in the social-property relations. The *nanren* did not see either the northern devastations or its imposition of new social-property relations on important parts of the population. Diverse strategies were used to co-opt the elite and appease the population,

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<sup>203</sup> As seen in Chapter Five, this refers to the privilege whereby capital officials bestowed similar status to members of their family.

<sup>204</sup> The Yuan also established in parallel a hereditary classification of families, mainly into commoner, military, artisan, and salt worker households. Enduring during the Ming and Qing periods, each military household had to provide one soldier and one supplementary trooper, and was conferred stipends, grants, and exemptions in exchange. Corruption was endemic, from military officers falsely boosting their number of troops to retain more salaries or selling 'leisure time' to their soldiers as bribes in exchange of 'exemption' from service. In North China in 1241, 1/7 of the population belonged to such households (Mote, 1994: 644).

such as lighter taxes than in the North. Kubilai rapidly extended the privileges granted to religious groups to the newly created category of ‘Confucian households’, composed of those 100 000 households who claimed degree- or office-holding status from the Song period (Mote, 1994: 637). This hereditary status conferred stipends and exemption from service duties. The route to regular office for these men involved direct recommendations, and marriage patterns reflected this, but there was continuity with the South Song era in the ‘localist’ strategy of having a family member who was an official so as to gain the related fiscal and legal privileges (Hymes, 1986)<sup>205</sup>. The South Song pattern of very large estates appears to have continued unabated.

Beyond these differences in administration and inter-elite relations between the mostly ‘landlordist’ South and the ‘feudal’ North, the Yuan *ulus* also encompassed a panoply of uniquely governed territories. Another important source of revenue was the newly conquered and differently administered territories of the wider Yuan *uluses* (sub-polities). Most of them consisted of the attribution of fiefs to local leaders in exchange for annual tribute and military assistance, loosely administered through the Pacification Commissions<sup>206</sup>. In other important regions, including Tibet and Korea, new elites were created through inter-marriage with the Yuan imperial line. The territories in Northeast Asia were particularly prone to overlapping jurisdictions between Mongol princes, Korean-favoured dynastic families, and the regular office-system, whose Branch Secretariat was a tool for contention over rights of surplus extraction between these two groups and the imperial center (Robinson, 2009). This precarious equilibrium between the central administration and localised princely rule came under attack after Kublai’s death in 1294.

### 1.1.3 The fall of the Yuan

This period is seen as the culmination of the antagonism between Mongol and Chinese ways (Dardess, 1973, 2003). This is partly true, but rather in the sense that the drying out of the revenues from expansion entailed more conflicts of redistribution within the elite and

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<sup>205</sup> The examination system was revived from 1315 to 1335 but it was not even the minor route it was during the Song. In 1333, only 2% of officials held a degree (Dardess, 1994: 563).

<sup>206</sup> For an example in the southwest, see Herman, 2002.

those took a ‘cultural’ aspect<sup>207</sup>. It initially opposed the ruling house to the Mongol appanage-holding nobility. Revolts from princes were not unheard of, however, during Kubilai’s reign<sup>208</sup>, but this reached another level in mid-Yuan in a context of halted expansion and rampant inflation. From the first imperial succession struggle after Kublai died without a designated successor, Yuan politics was characterised by a huge increase in imperial grants to the Mongol nobility and proliferation of ‘supernumerary’ offices and titles (sold or given), geared toward securing the support from the princes. Purges and coups d’État were frequent to the point that as many as nine emperors reigned during these four decades.

The last Yuan emperor, Shun-ti, reigned for a comparatively long period (1333-1368), albeit very soon to be on a drastically reduced region and on a rebellious population. This period has been called the renewal of an ‘inter-state system within [Chinese] borders’ (Cohen, 2000: 150) and the ‘regionalisation of Yuan rule’ (Dardess, 1994: 582). This happened in a context of ecological disasters<sup>209</sup>, famines, dire exploitation of the peasants, and widespread banditry. Its beginning is usually traced to 1351 and the rebellion of the peasants corvée to rechanneling the Yellow River in the Huai region. Localised sectarian movements such as the Red Turbans and bandits captured cities. Since officials and landlords were targets for the Red Turbans, bandits, and peasants alike, self-defence was organised at the local level (Dardess, 1970: 548-549). The Yuan encouraged regional and local resistance, so warlords (also sometimes ‘repented’ pirates and bandits) emerged by being given titles and ranks. Their allegiance soon became tenuous and these leaders with independent bases of power started competing among themselves for population and territories. If the rebellions were temporarily tamed, from 1355 onwards imperial control was restricted to the capital area. Regional regimes, whether under rebels, bandits, or formerly loyal warlords, carved out pieces of the north and the south, whilst polities like

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<sup>207</sup> The ‘lack of orderly imperial succession’ (Lorge, 2005: 91) characteristic of this period was however not due to a Mongol practice. The Mongol principles of succession through the *kurultai* were indeed loose (Barfield, 1989: 266) but the Chinese principle of primogeniture was used by the Yuan dynasty and heirs were designated by the current ruler.

<sup>208</sup> This is notably attested by such a North-Eastern prince, Nayan’s, attempt in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>209</sup> Among other environmental devastations, the Yellow River changed its course and the bubonic plague claimed millions of Chinese lives; this corresponds to the ‘Little Ice Age’ beginning in 1270.

Koryo and Tibet cut themselves loose from Mongol rule.

The North Red Turbans declared in 1355 their wish to restore to power a rebel Song dynasty with the emperor Han Lin-er. Despite the benevolent image of its leader who became the Ming founder, the renewed North Red Turbans - under Chu leadership since 1356 - militarily co-opted and conquered their political rivals. He was finally victorious against his rival contestant of the title of prince of Wu, the loyalist Chang, in the lower Yangzi in 1367, after having defeated Chen of the South Red Turbans<sup>210</sup> in 1364. The remnants of the Yuan dynasty fled to the steppe and the Ming dynasty was proclaimed in 1368.

### 1.2 The Ming dynasty

In IR as in Sinology, Ming China is understood as embodying the model of internal and external harmony which the Qing later emulated. State/society relations and interactions in East Asia are seen as having been essentially pacified through the office-system and the tribute-system. This peaceful, inward-looking agrarian society might even have been a condition for facilitating its wave of commercialisation (Rosenthal and Wong, 2011). Firstly, I will upset this traditional view of Ming benevolence in its 'external' relations (Zhang and Buzan, 2012) by outlining how the ruling house's drive to accumulate revenue did not disappear with the return to a 'native' reign. I will show that the tribute-system had other objectives than merely enabling Confucian order in the region and that this is far from being a notion which can explain all Ming geopolitical relations. I will build on works recently opposing the traditional view of the predominance of civil, rather than military, inclinations in the Ming government (Lorge, 2005; Swope, 2005). I, however, go beyond these accounts by showing that while stressing that all Chinese dynasties were built on - and maintained through - military power, we must go further in anchoring this in social property relations (rather than merely linking this to a generic imperial concern for state survival) if we are to succeed where Kang (2010) failed, i.e. in making sense of the two 'anomalistic' wars of the period. I will then argue against the IR view that we can consider

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<sup>210</sup> The South Red Turbans had proclaimed their rival Tianwen dynasty in 1351.

the Ming and Qing reigns as one entity, the stability of which can be explained by similar commitments to benevolence pacifying relations with the gentry and ‘society’ (Wong, 1997). This is what bringing back the agency of the producers, rather than merely considering them as a tax basis, leads to. I will demonstrate that Ming patterns of commercialisation occurred through a routine economy of violence, and were, singularly, concomitant with status differentiation. I will show that because of war-induced crises, the Ming state did not live up to its alleged benevolence and meritocracy, instead increasing levels of taxation and allowing the landed elite to further increase levels of exploitation and partake in a political economy of titles, tax exemptions, and semi-privatised sectors of ‘public’ activity. Uniquely drawing this way the links between Ming’s enmeshing of geopolitics, authority relations, and commercialisation, and understanding them as contentions around extraction and distribution of revenue, illustrates that even this dynastic archetype of Imperial China’s peacefulness and stability – the alleged ultimate source of divergence with the European state-system – does not correspond to IR and Sinology’s assertions.

### 1.2.1 Early Ming: conquests and tribute-system

1368 marked the proclamation of the new dynasty where the rebel, Taizu, became the emperor, Hongwu (1368-1398), but not the end of wars of conquest. The Yuan dynasty still held the three enormous provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Shaanxi until 1382, as well as Manchuria and Mongolia (Lorge, 2005: 105-108). We should not, however, be led into believing in the thereafter ‘defensive’ stance of the Ming because of the ‘non-interventionist’ imperial edict. In 1395 the earlier position (dating from 1371) was officially reiterated according to which the Ming would do no harm to neighbouring states it recognised through the tribute-system, which included among others Korea, Japan, Annam, and diverse South Asian kingdoms. Control over land and people, however, continued to be contested through state power from ‘within’ and ‘without’. Territorial disputes with Korea and the Mongols were not over<sup>211</sup>. The *tusi* system, which conferred hereditary titles to

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<sup>211</sup> Raids and punitive expeditions plagued Ming relations with the different Mongol polities throughout the dynasty. Relations the other polities maintained with the Mongols were also an object of dispute in their relations with China. For example, the first two Ming emperors refused to recognise the new Yi emperor

native chieftains in the southwest along the Yuan dynasty model, was not only a way to pacify and integrate neighbouring regions, but also ‘a system of appointment [...] which blurred the distinction between foreign vassals and autonomous territories beyond direct imperial control’ (Wang, 1998: 313). In this sense, this was a means to destabilise and fragment the various expanding kingdoms of the region (mainly Burma, Laos, and Annam), and to claim – even a loose – sovereignty over (and revenues from) their land and people. Their inclusion among the tribute-system and into the list of states not to be invaded should not blind us to such Ming aggressive foreign policy. Relations were neither hierarchical nor anarchical amongst East and Southeast Asian polities because they were based on a constant remodelling through assertions of sovereignty, conceived as a personal source of revenue.

However, the Mongol threat in the north was important enough to encourage the Ming to seek the relative pacification of relations with states in the south through the tribute-system, as a temporary agreement on sovereignty claims. This also factored in Hongwu’s decision to enfeoff the ‘princes of the blood’ – initially nine of the emperor’s sons – on the frontiers<sup>212</sup>. The creation of eighteen hereditary princedoms over Hongwu’s lifetime gave the princes independent military power and sovereignty on their estates. Usually seen in traditional Sinology merely as an ill-advised decision and an anomaly, this is best understood through the prism of the privatisation of authority relations and thus as one of the available strategies to manage geopolitical relations. The traditional rewarding of military leaders and those who pledged allegiance to the new dynasty with nobility titles and imperial land grants was also part of this, although emperors would struggle with them mostly for their encroachment on nearby land and fiscal imperial authority.<sup>213</sup> The

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because of this. The early Ming lukewarm relations with Korea were additionally complicated because the region of Liaodong was coveted by these three actors.

<sup>212</sup> This strategic move was also made in order to further assert control over the rebellious Central Yangzi.

<sup>213</sup> The 1373 edict against such encroachment was more a proof of the widespread occurrence of such phenomena than of the implementation of this policy. The purges between 1380 and 1394 however later built on such pronouncements (Langlois, 1998: 134). The subsequent emperor Jianwen did the same to curtail the rapidly growing power of the Buddhist clergy – who had become powerful landowners under Hongwu patronage – by restricting the amount of land they were allowed to own. This is why they will later rally to the Prince of Yan’s revolt (Chan, 1998: 190-191). Rewarding of surrenderers had its counterpart in punishment of rivals’ supporters. The Jiangnan region supported Taizu’s rival, so its gentry experienced punitive taxation

princedom would, however, be the reason for the short-lived reign of Hongwu's successor, his grand-son<sup>214</sup>, Jianwen (1399-1402). This second Ming emperor tried to assert more imperial control over the princes and abolished five of the princedom. In response, the powerful prince of Yan, whose fief was in Beijing, openly revolted in 1399. Within three years he captured the capital (Nanjing) and proclaimed himself the rightful successor of Hongwu, as emperor Yongle (1403-1425). He was to be the one who ultimately managed to curtail the power of the princes. Yongle created his own nobility, giving titles to those who helped in getting him to his position and to those who subsequently followed him in his later campaigns (such as against the Eastern Mongols), through his 'activist' foreign policy for which he became known.

Yongle's decision to annex Annam in 1407 has puzzled historians, who generally attribute it to a personality trait or a series of misperceptions<sup>215</sup>. This occurrence makes more sense when geopolitics is viewed as embedded in dynastic interests. This was foremost an intervention in a war of succession in which Yongle could have gained if not, firstly, for the weakness of his client – the Tran dynasty – and, secondly, the fierce resistance to the Ming annexation which impeded any steady flow of revenue from this new province developing. This is an enigma in the traditional literature only because it takes for granted the peaceful goal of the tribute-system and turns a blind eye to frontier politics. Despite the claims of the imperial ideology, the shifting of alliances and remapping of the East and Southeast Asian polities' territories was a constant<sup>216</sup>. The subsequent wars, conquests, and state consolidation that the Ming defeat triggered among Vietnam, Champa, Cambodia, and Laos (Wang, 1998, 317-318) should be enough to dispel any idea of a Chinese empire evolving

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(the southern provinces bore a disproportional tax quota during the Ming), if not the seizure of their land. However, private landlords managed to appropriate the newly dynastic-owned land after Hongwu's reign (Bernhardt, 1992: 41).

<sup>214</sup> Hongwu bypassed the principle of primogeniture to declare as heir the son of his dead first son (then heir apparent) rather than his second son.

<sup>215</sup> See for example Kang (2010) or Twitchett and Mote's (1998) *Cambridge History of China*.

<sup>216</sup> Another example of this in the Southwest is the Shan-Ming war occurring later in this period (1440-1449). This conflict started when one of the Shan polities was emboldened by the Ming defeat by Annam and decided to carve out territories from the Yunnan province. This dragged Burma into the war, to which the Ming later refused to give the promised territory of Luquan (Wang, 1998: 325-326). The Annam-China war had a wide impact which is best understood by socially conceptualising territoriality. Relations with Champa (another Chinese tributary state) were also tarnished by the Ming refusal to give back, once it had conquered Annam, Champa territories the previous Annamese dynasty had claimed (Chan, 1998: 271).

within a geopolitical vacuum. Rather than being the result of pure geopolitical competition, this was one variance of conflicts over property and power - to which also belongs the tribute-system and the *husi* system - where 'imperial control' is not an objective in itself but an opportunity to extract and redistribute social surpluses.

Another 'historical anomaly' of the early Ming period, understood only in its symbolic aspect, is the eunuch Zheng He's voyages. Mandated by Yongle, Zheng undertook seven expeditions in South East Asia between 1405 and 1433. This was at the same time a 'show of force' and an expedition with mercantilist overtones, opening 'routes' to trade. Since 1371, trade was officially to be conducted exclusively through tribute missions, so that its profits could end-up in imperial coffers. This prohibition of private trade neither meant a turning away from international commerce – as tribute missions flourished – nor a disappearance of private trade – which was renamed as 'piracy' (Mazumdar, 1997: 68-69). The tribute missions were composed both of luxury goods for the elite and consumers' products. As further propelled by Zheng voyages, the tribute-system was a convenient way for the state to channel revenues 'against domestic rivalry' – the 'pirates'<sup>217</sup> being supported by the coastal gentry (T'sao, 1982: 233) - as well as a geopolitical instrument, resulting in an ingenious tool at the disposition of dynastic interests. However, Chinese superiority should not be exaggerated and the tribute system, at times, had also been a way to make the most out of relations with other states that the Chinese dynasties were unable to conquer.

### 1.2.2 The mid- to late-Ming: commercialisation and uprisings

A new trend in Ming studies focuses on the important commercialisation which took place from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century onwards (Rawski, 1972; Li, 1998). Different goods were commercialised according to the region, but the most notable ones were silk, cotton, and grain. Upon Frank's (1998) impetus, work by IR scholars on China tend to emphasise how the already important inter-Asian trade became inter-related with Europe through the arrival

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<sup>217</sup> As seen in Chapter Six, they were moreover often wrongly portrayed in imperial ideology as non-Chinese.



of the Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese<sup>218</sup>. However, in order to gain access to Chinese markets, the European traders had to enter through the important network of private, though illegal, trade sponsored by the defiant coastal gentry and officialdom, and we shall see that this was only one part of the wider routine economy of violence which contradicts the IR vision of a conflict-free environment favouring commercialisation (as promoted by Wong, 1997). Moreover, this commercialisation must be understood as a case of pre-capitalist, involutory, ‘proto-industrialisation’ deriving from the diminution of the land/labour ratio upon the impact of demographic growth and the peasant subdivision of holdings. This affected patterns of urbanisation, production, and marketisation (Huang, 1985, 1990), and Ming commercialisation was uniquely based on an estate economy.

This estate economy had its origin partly in the nobility’s descendants whom successive emperors had created, both in the capitals and provinces<sup>219</sup>. It was also due to landlords and agnatic groups forcibly appropriating land and profiting from indebted peasants, on whom the tax burden increasingly fell (Elvin, 1973: 235; Mazumdar, 1997: 196). The status of the peasants varied enormously, ‘ranging from hereditary servitude to voluntarily indenture for a limited period’: alongside tenants who owed mainly rent to their landlord (*diannong*), there were also peasants having pledged to them their property (the *touxian* system) or their labour (the *maishen* system), these latter processes having affected up to 20-30% of the population of the Jiangnan region (Mazumdar, 1997: 198-199). It is impossible to assert the percentage of tenancy and people with servile status across China during the Ming: their number varied depending on the province, as did the degree of servitude every category implied, from hereditary bound-servants to chattel slavery status (Wakeman, 1985: 616-624). The overall trend is that the gentry was usurping more and more land from tax-paying registered households, a process which reduced imperial revenues as the degree-holding families were exempted from taxes. These changes in tenure patterns in favour of increasing estates and absentee landlordism, along with a diminishing free-holding

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<sup>218</sup> The latter conquered the trading port of Malacca in 1511.

<sup>219</sup> This was also aggravated by Yongle’s costly move, completed in 1419, of the capital to Beijing, his former princely fiefdom. This entailed, on top of the mass relocation of peasants to the Northern Metropolitan Area and the imposition of an extra levy (for the transport of grain to the capital) on the Southern provinces, the grant of imperial estates to relatives and eunuchs – in control of 15 to 45% of the region’s land (Robinson, 2011: 36).

population, were enough to lead the Ming to the 'Single whip' reform (Bernhardt, 1992: 39-42). The former *lijia* organisation for tax collection and labour services<sup>220</sup> exempted tenants from *corvée*; as their number grew, this system consequently became obsolete. Also enabled by the influx of silver international commerce brought, this commutation of the service duty into a tax payable in silver was officially applied everywhere in 1581 - after its early adoption in the south from 1436 - and contributed to the further commercialisation of the Ming economy, since a part of the harvest had to be sold for silver.

These patterns of growing estates and commercialisation relied on an 'economy of violence' strongly under-represented by the literature. This operated routinely through the local officials and their *yamen* (the clerks and wider staff they hired), the gentry and their private militias, and the court elite and its militarised entourage.<sup>221</sup> Power (in the form of state functions) and property (imperial and private lands) were contended for militarily. Piracy in an increasingly commercial economy ran parallel to this mixing of illicit force and official functions. The routine economy of violence was even further exacerbated in the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century. This was the beginning, at the local level, of 'ongoing violence for the control of irrigation works, of markets, of fields and harvests, inter-lineage feuding and feuding between rival gangs of smugglers and pirates' (Mazumdar, 2001: 98)<sup>222</sup>.

Parallel to - and enmeshed with - this economy of violence, existed a political economy of shares of 'state' power expanding over the Ming period which explains its characterisation as the 'forfeiture of public authority to private agents' (Smith and von Glahn, 2003) and factionalism. On top of the opportunity to act as 'tax-shelters' for indebted peasants whose land the gentry acquired, degrees allowed their holders to benefit from the 'privatisation of authority' at sub-imperial levels. Private agents benefitted from usurping of the *lijia* function (and its many additional fees and surcharges imposed in exchange for this 'service'), 'charitable' institutions (e.g. estates and granaries), but also 'benevolent

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<sup>220</sup> This institution, created in 1381, organised the rural population in units of 110 households responsible for a variety of local services, including tax collection and its remittance to the local officials.

<sup>221</sup> At times, this structural feature of Ming China exploded, as in the events of the Rebellion of 1509. This rebel threat to the dynasty was not the exceptional product of an evil eunuch recruiting bandits but instead revealed the routine elite patronage of 'men of force' (Robinson, 2001).

<sup>222</sup> Such lineage feuds were mostly prevalent in South China coastal provinces.

markets'. These were founded in the wake of Ming commercialisation by local landlords investing in their control over the grain market and pricing (Mann, 1987: 73-74). Powerful lineage groups used the private academies and literary societies (like the Donglin Academy and the Restoration Society) as a means to increase the chances of social upheaval, through preparation for exams and the building of connections needed to access high offices. These were also centers of political dissension, their existence being a source of contention with the imperial center (Elman, 1993). By that time, the eunuchs, used by the emperors as their private agents, had formed important networks of patronage at court which nourished factionalism. Factionalism, and the political purges it entailed, could be very lucrative to the emperor's entourage, as the confiscated lands of the accused were awarded in turn to favourites (Wakeman, 1985: 336).

Such diminution of state revenues due to tax evasion and peasant 'tax-sheltering' combined with increasingly expensive stipends to the nobility<sup>223</sup> and rising military costs in the 1590s created a 'war-induced fiscal crisis' (von Glahn, 1996: 162). This could not be entirely made up for by the widespread purchase of rank, and increasingly of proper official positions also, which constituted an indispensable source of revenue for the Ming dynasty in times of heightened military expenditures (Huang, 1974b: 244-246; Ho, 1964: 32-33)<sup>224</sup>. The 1570-1610 'military revival' (Swope, 2008: 70) included emperor Wanli's (1572-1620) 'three great punitive campaigns': against a mutiny in the northwest (in 1592); indigenous rebellions in the southwest (led by a hereditary official acknowledged through the *tusi* system in 1590-1600); and Hideyoshi, who was pursuing the unification of Japan. The Imjin war (1592-1598) must be understood in the context of the politicisation of trade and the contestation of territory as a source of dynastic revenues. Japan tried to invade Korea as a springboard for an invasion of China, since the Choson dynasty refused to join in such a projected expedition. Short of such conquest of China, Hideyoshi wanted to gain access to trade with the Ming. Korea asked protection from the Ming and was granted it, enlisting

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<sup>223</sup> The imperial family entitled to stipends grew over the centuries to the point that, at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, 80 000 persons were dependent on such stipends, the cost of which reached more than the government's total tax revenues (Wakeman, 1985: 332). This does not include the 'meritorious' nobility's stipends.

<sup>224</sup> Wanli also had to send his eunuch staff to the provinces in order to squeeze out more profits under the 'Mining excises and commercial taxes' program.

China within this war. The war ultimately reached a stalemate and its issue was a Ming victory by default after Hideoyoshi's death. In the meantime, Nurhaci established the Latter Jin dynasty - from which the Manchus later emerged – and the wars with Wanli this gave rise to were additional heavy military expenses. The building of the Great Wall connecting garrison posts, starting in the 1550s, indeed never repelled Mongol attacks.

As it was peasants' labour intensification, enserfment, and increasing share of the tax burden which powered the Ming commercialised economy, there were important peasants' uprisings overlapping the Ming/Qing transition. This began in the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century, gained momentum in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, and endured until the 1720s in a process where the peasants freed themselves of their legally dependent status and won major gains in terms of tenancy rights. This was a phenomenon which cut across statutes and regions during the late Ming period. In South China, massive tenant revolts in the 1590s (Tanaka, 1984) were later joined by boundservant-serf rebellions in the Yangzi region in the 1630s-1640s (Oyama, 1984). Uprisings also occurred in the rest of China and were specifically aimed at redistributing wealth and land and the abolition of dependant status (Mazumdar, 1997: 202-203; Walker, 1999: 40-50). Famines and epidemics raged from the 1620s, leading to severe depopulation. Combined with the demographic losses due to these widespread revolts and to the Manchu wars, this enhanced the bargaining power of the peasants in relation to their landlords (Brenner and Isett, 2002: 615). On top of proper uprisings, peasants destroyed evidence of their rent or dependence relations and/or fled from their landlords.

The consequences for relations between the state, gentry, and peasants, and the history of the institutionalisation of the peasants' gains, are best left to be explained in the next section. It is however important to note that peasants had already begun, during the late Ming period, to gain ownership of land or secure tenancy rights leading to politically fixed rent. In the North, peasants acceded to the ownership of the vacated land they came to occupy, due to the more severe devastation of the region. In the South, peasants bought permanent tenure or rights of cultivation ('topsoil rights') or opened land for landlords in exchange for these. This system of dual ownership gave subsoil rights to the legal owner (the landlord) who was responsible for the tax payment, whereas the peasant acquired

security of tenancy: as long as he paid the rent - which could not be raised, he could not be evicted from the land, whilst he still could sublet, mortgage, or sell his topsoil rights (Bernhardt, 1992: 25).

These rebellions and war-induced fiscal crises paved the way for the Manchu 'great enterprise' (Wakeman, 1985). During Chongzhen's rule (1628-1644), court factionalism and dissensions over the means of increasing imperial revenue amongst representatives of the Northern and Southern gentries – and partly carried on through eunuchs and societies - reached new heights. A Northwest alliance (rallying the upper gentry of the Shanxi, Henan, and Shaanxi provinces dislodged from offices in these court struggles) arose and captured Beijing in April 1644. Less than two months later however, the Manchus ended their very short reign and sealed the fate of the Ming dynasty.

### 1.3 The Qing dynasty

As this was the case for the Sinology of the Yuan period, focussing exclusively on the debate on the alienness or Sinicisation of the regime risks occluding the social changes a dynastic transition might imply, here in the form of the institutionalisation of new social property relations which peasant struggles gave rise to, from the late Ming onwards. The 17<sup>th</sup> Century was a period of fundamental transformations in the balance of class forces: producers were foremost concerned in securing their access to land whilst officials and landlords mainly sought to find ways to reproduce their shattered social power. Whether Mongol, Han Chinese, or Manchu, the dynastic house was always alien to most of these agents and what is to be studied is foremost what entailed the re-organisation of alliances between the ruling house and regional and local elites. The story of Ming loyalism and bannerification of Manchuria of the early Qing reigns nonetheless illustrates the way cultural perceptions interplayed with struggles for power. I will show that Qing commercialisation proceeded along different patterns than during the Ming period and that the Qing dynasty was sustained by a unique politicisation of trade, benevolence, and a highly differentiated administration of China resulting from the peasant uprisings. This cannot be captured by their portrayal as 'Sinicised', as this term refers to an ideal-type of China which never existed. Moreover, such problematisation of space, empire, state,

property, and conflicts in the new Qing social relations – crucially lacking in the neo-Smithian and IR analyses– further demonstrates that the category of ‘China’ does not hold, and thereby neither does the narrative of its distinctive, enduring (geo)political stability allegedly setting it on a opposite path to Europe.

### 1.3.1 From the creation of the Manchu to the political consolidation of the Qing dynasty

Based in Manchuria in the Northeast, the Jurchens<sup>225</sup> interacted with the Ming as participants in the unofficial tribute-system: they received titles from China and traded through tribute missions and border markets. The Jurchen elites lived on large estates worked by serfs and bound-servants (often prisoners of war), but their economy relied also on hunting and on plundering – more often than not China’s border regions. Nurhaci was one Jurchen clan leader officially recognised by the Ming from 1583. He unified the Jurchens, and then the Mongols in 1593. Within the Jurchen polity, the ruling house and top aristocracy were organised in a militarised system called the Eight Banners, in a process which eroded clan ties. From 1613, Nurhaci built military colonies by ‘rusticating bannermen’. Between 1618 and 1623, he made important conquests in the Ming fertile and populous territory of Liao-tung. As his successor, his son Hung Taiji (1626-1643), gained annual tribute (from 1627) and military contributions (from 1636) from Korea, and he also led the three major plundering invasions of China proper. The following child emperor Shunzi (1644-1661) was under the regency of Dorgon, Hung Taiji’s half-brother, who led the conquest of Beijing in 1644.

Meanwhile, Ming loyalists were organising in the secondary capital of Nanjing. Their rule, fraught with struggles for imperial succession and difficult relations with gentry and warlords, did not last long as the Qing army arrived there a year later. Most officials and local gentries submitted to the Manchus, having to adopt the Manchu hairstyle. Loyalist rebellions nonetheless occupied the banner armies for the next two decades, notably the rebellions of the Three Feudatories (1673-1681) and the Zheng maritime empire (1661-

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<sup>225</sup> The term Manchu was adopted only in 1635. On the building of the Manchu polity from its Jurchen origins to the conquest of Beijing, see Crossley, 1999, Perdue, 2005: 109-132, Roth-Li, 2002, and Wakeman, 1985: 23-86, 157-224.

1683)<sup>226</sup>. After these conquests and the crushing of resistance, the Qing had to find a way to repopulate devastated areas and to invite elite collaboration.

### 1.3.2 The Manchu ethos in Manchuria

The unique regime established by the Qing in Manchuria was as a result of the southern part of their homeland and North China being depopulated both of producers and elites at the beginning of their reign. Upon the emperor's order, the 'Conquest elite'<sup>227</sup> based in Manchuria had moved south where the banner forces were needed. Estates' owners in North China had already fled the Northwest rebel armies and the Banner Armies (or been integrated into the Conquest elite). The early Qing emperors took this opportunity to claim Manchuria as 'imperial patrimony' and carve out estates for military farms upon the demobilisation of bannermen. Due to the degree of depopulation, the Qing rulers also had to encourage peasants' opening or restoring of land for production and to reward with rank and office those who could recruit them until 1668 (Isett, 2007: 33). Free peasants (such as convicts and prisoners of war) were brought into banner elites' manors to become serfs/bound-servants (the traditional basis of the Jurchen organisation). The Kangxi emperor (1662-1722) thereafter sought to ban new Han migration to the Manchu homeland. For cultural, strategic, and economic reasons, Manchuria was at the heart of imperial concerns (Isett, 2007: 23-42). The Qing heartlands were believed to be preserving Manchu ways, foremost the military skills needed to preserve hegemony and undertake subsequent conquests. The region was also crucial for defence against Russian and Jurchen invasions. Its estate lands were moreover imperative in the rewarding and social reproduction of the Qing aristocracy. Establishing measures to segregate between Han commoners' villages and bannerlands and to prevent further Han colonisation was necessary to protect the integrity of bannermen manors.

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<sup>226</sup> The Qing had to empower surrendered Ming generals in order to fight off revolts. When further sovereign powers were refused to the Prince of Yunnan and Guizhou, he rebelled, joined by the Princes of Guangdong and Fujian. Another Ming loyalist, Zheng - whose family had built an important maritime trading network - chose to move his forces to Taiwan, dislodging the Dutch. In order to cut supplies for the Zheng maritime empire, the Qing decided in 1662 to ban trade and to evacuate the coastal cities of five provinces by displacing their population inland. Faced with this formidable adversary, the Qing conquered Taiwan only in 1683.

<sup>227</sup> Isett (2007: 7) uses this term to designate 'the ruling house, its coterie of noble followers, and its elite military units - the Banner Armies'.

### 1.3.3 Violence and Qing benevolence in China's small-holder economy

If the Manchu ethos was at the origins of Qing administration in the Northeast, the 'Chinese' ideology of *minsheng*<sup>228</sup> attended to the Qing governing of China proper. Despite its 'alienness', the Qing rulers were the first Chinese dynasty in a long time to seek to protect peasants and promote popular welfare, at least in China proper<sup>229</sup>. This is, however, because a different socio-political terrain awaited the Manchus there, rather than due to the 'Sinicisation' of their rule. As stressed above, the political power of the landed elite had been shattered by the repeated uprisings and the gain of peasants' control over their land and labour. The new taxation system shed light on the aims and limitations of the Qing rule. In 1713, the emperor proclaimed the 'never raise tax' edict. From 1750 onwards, tax was linked exclusively to the ownership of land: the poll tax was merged with the land tax and service labour was abolished. Once combined, these policies resulted in the protection of the Qing tax base. This promoted households' registration as well as the mobility of peasants, encouraging them to re-settle abandoned farms and to open new land. Ensuring peasants' gains in politically fixed rent and maintaining low taxes for small-holders also reduced the risk of indebted peasants' flight to tax-protected estates.

In North China, where peasants had secured ownership of land, tax was levied directly on peasants, who were responsible through their village organisation to remit taxes to officials (Huang, 1985). Peasants in fact paid for tax collection, since surcharges in the form of customary fees were expected to be gained by the sub-bureaucracy *yamen*'s runners (Reed, 2000). For South China, where tenancy was now the norm, the new addition to the Qing code of legislation on rent relations restricted the power of landlords. This limited the fiscal privileges of the gentry and abolished their rights to private justice over their tenants and to turn peasants into slaves or bound-servants. The Qing however could not dispense with the role of landlords in the collection of tax, which was 'paid out of rent'. The ruling house

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<sup>228</sup> As explained in Chapter Six, *minsheng* expressed the benevolence of the Chinese state in ensuring popular welfare through its governance.

<sup>229</sup> Ming law was adapted in the Qing code promulgated in 1646, including the differentiation between 'master and slave'. However, given the situation the Qing rulers encountered in China proper, such legislation was mainly used in Manchuria. The Qing officially codified in law peasants' gains in 1727.



therefore supported in law and practice the landlords' rights to collect rent, with *yamen*'s runners enforcing the payment of defaulted rents (Bernhardt, 1992: 31). This arrangement had the double advantage of decreasing the power of the gentry - with whom the ruling house was in competition for the extraction of social surplus - whilst enlisting this group for administrative purposes (Mazumdar, 1997: 211-217; Shigeta, 1984).

This Qing institutionalisation of peasant gains forced the landed elite to seek new ways to preserve its social power, such as investing in lineages, tax-farming, bounded markets, and commercial ventures<sup>230</sup>. This gave way 'in the early Qing [to] a decisive shift from elite power based specifically on the control of land and peasants to elite power based more broadly on semi-bureaucratic public activity' (Bernhardt, 1992: 14). Diversification of their activities was the key for the Qing elites' preservation of their power: this gave rise to the era of 'gentry-merchants' (*shengshang*)<sup>231</sup> facilitated by the commercialised economy and the easiness to purchase degrees. This latter common feature of Imperial China was exacerbated under the Qing (Ho, 1964; Kaske, 2008, 2012; McNicholas, 2007; Theobald, 2013; Zhang, 2010)<sup>232</sup>. Selling of titles was a widespread and regular practice planned in the state's finances, whereas the selling of appointments proved crucial in times of war. A proxy system through which officials embezzled - acting as intermediaries for this funnelling of contributions - and a parallel system in which scholarly establishments themselves sold similar licences concurrently emerged (McNicholas, 2013).

The Qing also enlisted the help of merchants in the collection of commercial taxes by supporting their organisation in associations and guilds. At the local level, *yazhang* merchants built on their 'liturgical' role to invest in 'parapolitical control' whilst officials diverted revenues by selling these merchant licences (Mann, 1987: 94). The Kangxi

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<sup>230</sup> These strategies are discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

<sup>231</sup> This term is widely used amongst Qing historians after Chang Chung-li (1962). See also Ho (1962) and Esherick and Rankin (1990) on gentry families undertaking commercial activities.

<sup>232</sup> Purchasing a degree was in fact a purchase of the right not to pay the percentage of labour services due in the combined tax and of immunity to legal punishment, as well as being a first step in the entry to officialdom, through the 'regular' appointment system or purchase of a post during temporary sales occurring in times of financial need for the state. The contribution system could also serve acting officials, for example purchasing promotions.

emperor (1661-1722) had rescinded the ban on overseas private trade from 1685, as the ruling house and its favoured allies had interests in it – the imperial household sponsored through loans specific trades, including the copper trade (Mazumdar, 1997: 95). Such interests become evident through the study of the Imperial Household Department (Thornbert, 1977). On top of its administration of the imperial landed estates, this imperial branch supervised the salt administration as well as the monopolies in ginseng and copper. The latter monopolies' profits went directly to the pockets of the imperial family and were also used for the prestige economy of gift giving. This Department also administered commercial taxes, including those from foreign trade. These custom duties, through its famous bureau at Canton, combined pre-set quotas to be given to the center as well as informal surcharges lining the pockets of officials, as was the case for other offices. However, on top of these regular taxes and customary 'squeezes', the superintendants eager to preserve their lucrative positions collected an extra tax, funnelled to the 'Privy Purse'. This excess tax became direct personal revenue for the Qing rulers.

Following this re-opening of China to foreign trade, commercial activity increased, but this was due also to proto-industrialisation and the promotion of inter-regional grain trade. This other aspect of the benevolence of Qing administration relieved central regions affected by structural shortages of grain – due to the subdivisions of plots - with the over-production of the relatively newly colonised areas<sup>233</sup>. This was undertaken by one important guild of the deputised *yazhang*. The preservation of the Qing tax base in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century relied on this and on the promotion of the colonisation of peripheries - for example, through tax waivers for the opening of new land under Yongzheng reign (1732-1735). These new arrangements between the ruling house and elites which derived their profits either through land, commerce, or both functioned as much – and maybe even more - through routine violence as during the previous period. Lineage feuds, forced appropriation of land, private vendettas to assert trade monopolies, and recourse to the political protection of *yamen*'s forces were endemic because property was politically (and thus militarily) constituted. This was a race to appropriate shares of 'state' power by participating in *gong* (public good),

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<sup>233</sup> This system is discussed in Chapter Six.

around which the discourse to legitimise oneself or exclude others was organised.

#### 1.3.4 Qing geopolitical accumulation

If Manchuria and China proper were uniquely administered, so too were the later additions of Taiwan, Tibet, Mongolia, and Turkestan (including Xinjiang). These regions had never been under Ming control. Since the beginning of the dynasty, Russian colonisation advanced towards Qing territories. Relations between Russia and China were further complicated by conflicts on terms of trade and rivalry for the allegiance of Mongol tribes in the region. After a series of armed conflicts, the Qing and the Romanovs re-drew the map of the region in 1689 through the Treaty of Nerchinsk, carving out territories from diverse tribes and foremost the Zhungar Mongol polity (1671-1760) (Perdue, 2005: 161-173). The Qing built on these Western Mongols' succession struggles to integrate most of this region (Western Mongolia and Xinjiang)<sup>234</sup>. The conquest of Turkestan and its oases as a by-product of this conquest was completed in 1765. Following struggles between different Mongol polities to control Tibet<sup>235</sup>, the Qing took the opportunity to re-map this region in 1724, dividing it into territories for the Dalai-lama and his noble houses and in distinct territories for two Mongol tribes (including the Khoshots, Tibet overlords and Qing allies), administered in the same way as the bannerlands in Manchuria (Perdue, 2001). The Qing also carved out territories to be attached to China's provinces.

This integration of the immense Western region allowed better regulation of trade and tax revenues whilst providing additional land to be opened by Chinese peasants<sup>236</sup>. The Qing used different *ad hoc* strategies, including bannerification, forced and voluntary (encouraged via tax remittance) emigration of Chinese population (on merchants' or bannermen estates, or on land they owned), implantation of branches of the office-system,

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<sup>234</sup> The Western Mongols had accepted tribute since 1653, but relations were still tumultuous.

<sup>235</sup> The Khoshot Mongols in Xihai (roughly to the West of the North-Western province of Shaanxi, squeezed between Tibet and Inner Mongolia), were overlords of the Tibetan polity to its South. Qing-Khoshot relations were harmonious, as these Mongols submitted to the Manchu polity from 1637 onwards. The Qing had to recapture Tibet in 1720 against the Zhungar taking control of it in 1717. The Khoshot thereafter tried to re-establish control over Tibet.

<sup>236</sup> Herman (2014) argues that we should also take into account, while analysing the Qing extension of power in the West and Southwest, the importance of their copper resources, then used as currency.

and loose governance through the Ming *tusi* system. There is no space here to describe each of the different Qing types of administration in Central Asia<sup>237</sup>, but the actual social-property relations and extraction and redistribution of revenue depended on the strength of the system already in place, the degree of resistance, and the strategic and economic importance of each territory to the empire.

Other suppressions of rebellions and enlarging of Qing frontiers against nearby polities formed parts of the Qianlong ‘ten great campaigns’, but the end of his reign in 1796 marked the beginning of the decline of the Qing dynasty. This is also where our reconstruction of Imperial China’s history, according to the California School’s parameters of the period of similarity, must end, so as to return to the debates on the comparison with early modern Europe.

## **2. A return to the non-transition debate: Comparison with Continental Europe**

This comparison is centered on the only European state form which could pretend to rival Imperial China in its political centralisation and territorialisation. My main focus will be on the classical ideal-type of European state-formation, Absolutist France, even though I might sometimes refer to social practices shared with other European polities. I argue that there were important similarities in geopolitical environment, imperial ideologies, and strategies of social reproduction between Late Imperial China and continental Europe. These similarities are obscured by the myth of the Sinicising Chinese benevolent and peaceful culture. This represents a further argument to undermine the Eurocentric assumption, in the traditional narrative of ‘state-system versus empire’ dichotomy, of a homogenous Europe whose development contrasted with the diverging case of China.

The erroneous assumption of the Sinicisation model is that it presumes the singularity of the Chinese state, based on the transhistorical ideal-type of the office-system, and the uniqueness of its geopolitical environment, characterised by Confucianised polities, presided over through the equally benevolent tribute-system, and challenging ‘nomad’ and

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<sup>237</sup> Perdue’s *China Marches West* (2005) is the main reference on this. See also Di Cosmo (1998).

state-less neighbours. This leads it to oppose this Sinifying and exceptional Chinese ‘state’, surviving in an unequal and dichotomised regional system, to a European state-system, in which the neo-evolutionary pattern of geopolitical competition led to a world of similar territorial sovereign states. On the one hand, this reifies the European international system of the period, better understood as a ‘multi-actor Europe’ (Teschke, 2003: 95-112), composed of feudal or territorial monarchies, ‘city-states, city-leagues, the Empire, the Church-State, merchant-republics, aristocratic-republics, and peasant-republics’. The European ‘states’ forming the ideal-type of the neo-Weberian picture are best understood through the consolidation of absolutist regimes in the course of expansion and political accumulation. This must be understood in turn by the previous divergence of Spanish, German, French, and British social trajectories occurring upon the outcomes of socio-political conflicts during the encounters of specific social regimes by post-Carolingian elites trying to colonise Europe.

On the other hand, this traditional comparison relies on a simplistic distinction of political forms between Han China and its stateless neighbours. Whilst Genghis Khan’s Mongols were mostly from nomadic and distinct ethnic origins, the pre-conquest Jurchens and Manchus were not, having built polities resembling those of the Song or Ming dynasties<sup>238</sup>. There was therefore nothing regionally unique about the ‘Chinese’ (or Kang’s four Confucian polities’) tax-office state. It was nevertheless as specific as it was for other polities in the region, and as varying in its imbrications with state-elite relations during native and alien dynasties. Moreover, Late Imperial China was not left in a geopolitical vacuum any more than it was during the previous periods reviewed. Even the mighty Qing were challenged as much by the Zhungar Mongol state as by absolutist Russia until 1760, in a contention for power pitching three great empires against each other - and we should

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<sup>238</sup> The dichotomisation of alien and native rule moreover leads to unanswerable questions. Was the gentry the Mongols encountered when they conquered North China ‘Chinese’ because their families had lived under the Song from 960 to 1125, or ‘alien’ because they rallied to the Jurchen Jin state from 1125 to 1234? Were Taizu conquests more natural and welcomed by the Jiangnan gentry, the perceived heart of China, when they were dispossessed for having supported another anti-Yuan warlord? We fare slightly better if we rather tackle the issue of the manner in which the non-Chinese governed. But why would the Manchus abandon their own tax-office state upon conquering China? For sure, the pre-Conquest Manchus functioned also with serfdom and estates but these were hallmarks of the Song and Ming as much as their centralised state apparatuses.

not anachronistically exclude from this the one which simply did not become a nation-state nor should these three ‘empires’ be considered as motivated differently than the European ‘states’ on the (geo)political level (Perdue, 2005: 1-4, 18). Resistance and occupation are certainly enmeshed with cultural differentiation, and I have pinpointed in this way elements of the Mongol conception of *ulus* and *appanage* rights, Manchu ethos, and ‘Chinese’ imperial ideology. Still, whatever the origins of the conqueror ruling houses, outside of the territories they reserved for their entourage<sup>239</sup>, they had to govern estranged elites and producers whose changing power and relations were the Yuan, Ming, and Qing’s more important concerns. To summarise, just as there was no Europe composed of similar types of state with permanently equal power, there were not two single and opposite types of politics with unequal power in East Asia.

In fact, the imperial ideology borrowed by ‘alien’ and ‘native’ dynasty alike bore some resemblance to European ‘enlightened’ absolutisms. The French *despotisme éclairé* or German *Bauernschutzpolitik* were no more magnanimous and based on Reason than the Qing implementation of *minsheng*. It is difficult therefore to pinpoint an ‘alien’ type of rule, moreover as the regional differences in administration in any given regime discourage any association between ethnic origins and style of governance. Through *minsheng*, the Qing took advantage of the changing social property relations in China proper to secure their tax base by institutionalising the new relation to land which the peasants had already enforced against landlords. This bears similarities to the building of the French absolutist state following the 14<sup>th</sup> Century crisis. As in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Imperial China, the French lords were faced with a peasantry confronting them from a position of relative strength. Consequently, they were unable to raise rents or to evict them. Participating in state activities became one of the best avenues to reproduce their social power, but at the same time the monarchy was consolidating in law peasants’ gains in order to weaken the lords’ position against whom the Crown was in competition for producers’ revenues (Brenner, 1985). We thus see similar strategies on the part of the peasants, landlords, and states in France as in China, which gave way to a restructuring of their inter-relations. Contrary to what Wong (1997) affirms,

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<sup>239</sup> Whether in the forms of appanages, princedoms, or bannerlands, these were essential to all ‘native’ and ‘alien’ conquest dynasties as a means to reward its elite.

peasant protection was not unique to Confucian China, neither was it a benevolent act.

The strategies of social reproduction of the Chinese ruling houses were similar (but once again, by no means identical) to Europeans'. These dynastic strategies are summarised in Teschke (2003: 220-222). Dynastic houses could try to squeeze the peasantry or to sell parts of state power. Among strategies of geopolitical accumulation, we find territorial expansion or state-backing of trade. The selection between these strategies depended on the balance of class forces. These strategies are rarely outlined as such in the literature on Imperial China because of its generally neutral conception of the state. When they are, this is attributed to the 'alien' character of the rulers. I contend that all these strategies were employed by the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties alike. We should not view the taxation system merely as a way to ensure the daily execution of state functions, but as a means of appropriation and distribution of revenues among the elite. I have also outlined how the state was directly or indirectly (i.e. within the tribute-system, through the *ortoy*, or via the ruling house's private investment) involved in commercial ventures backed by military and political means. Likewise, the widespread practices of selling ranks, official positions, and licences for para-political activities were ways for the ruling house to raise revenues by privatising its power. There were in addition diverse ways for the ruler to expand its tax base by controlling land and people, such as the promotion of colonisation, the *tusi* system, the tribute-system, the Pacification Commissions, and outright conquests.

The Mongols and Manchus' conquests might be presented as anomalous in Chinese history, but they rather illustrate the relations between geopolitical accumulation and redistribution of wealth to the ruling class, such additional revenues facilitating socio-political arrangements which reduced the risk of producing and non-producing classes' revolts against their rule. Faced with comparatively stronger 'external' foes and an emboldened 'internal' gentry weakening the power of the peasants and the state's capacity to extract surpluses, the Ming dynasty diversified its geopolitical strategies for acquiring revenue. For each dynasty, however, socio-spatial relations were decisive, since military investments - induced by the need to allow the ruling groups to maintain their class power - provoked fiscal, and ultimately social, crises. This is obviously not to say that the diverse European

trajectories and the one of Imperial China were identical. These dynasties however similarly drew on a wide and overlapping variety of pre-modern strategies, and the non-development this entailed was in stark contrast to what was happening in Britain, as argued in the Thesis Introduction.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the pre-modern trajectory of Late Imperial China under the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. I have grounded in social-property relations the transformations of the state, relations to property, and political geography between and within dynastic reigns. One of the most important changes during this period was the transformation brought to the relation between the ruling house, the landlords, and the producers following the peasant uprisings beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and whose gains were institutionalised in the following centuries. This historical reconstruction has demonstrated the insufficiency of the traditional literature's focus on continuity and stability apart from periodic dynastic transitions. This has also questioned the bases of the division between 'native' and 'alien' rules.

This chapter also aimed to go beyond the traditional PM analyses of China in relation to Britain. I have argued that a more thorough study of state power and socio-spatial practices could re-route the debate on an alleged East/West dichotomy, by illustrating there were proto-modern elements neither in Imperial China nor in continental Europe. My historicisation of the Chinese state and East Asian international system has established that these were much more dynamic and conflictual than it is generally acknowledged, precisely because they were the site of on-going contestations over land and people - as was the case in continental Europe also. By ruling out the origins of divergence in exclusive pan-European features, this re-problematizes the 'transition debate' as an outcome of socio-political conflicts and undermines the conflating of European trajectories into one model to be opposed to Imperial China. Brenner (and Isett, 2002), Huang (1985, 1990), Isett (2007), and Mazumdar (1997) have convincingly demonstrated that even the most commercialised regions of Ming-Qing China relied on family production and functioned alongside pre-modern patterns. This destabilises the California School's assumption of a 'Eurasian



similarity' between - at the very least - the Yangzi Delta and Britain, since only the latter exhibited patterns of modern development visible in terms of increase of labour productivity and demographic trends. My contribution adds to these crucial findings a parallel comparison highlighting the pre-modern similarities between Imperial China and continental Europe, which further undermines the Eurocentric belief in the dichotomy of their political and geopolitical forms, deemed to model their different types of development.

In the end, such a comparison through the operationalisation of the anti-Eurocentric PM method leads me to affirm, against the 'Rise of the West' narratives, that no pan-European uniqueness existed during this period. Neither did any 'Eurasian similarity', due to the divergent case of Britain. Socialising geopolitics and rationality, whilst historicising our analytical categories, in order to explain specific developmental trajectories thus results in re-evaluating the basis of comparison for the debate on transitions and non-transitions, and in asserting the imperative to go back to social agency in order to understand the 'Great Divergence'.

## Conclusion

This thesis started by asking if a non-Eurocentric understanding of China's 'non-rise' was possible. It aimed to contribute to the problematique of the similarity and dissimilarity between Chinese and European development through a return to the debate on the transition to capitalist modernity. Despite originating within the fields of HS and economic history, this topic is crucial to IR because it involves the issue of the temporal and spatial location of the dynamics which gave rise to modern geopolitics. More specifically, this thesis has asked what were the conditions of possibility for IR's abstract categories of the 'state' and the 'international' to emerge, and has critically evaluated their adequacy for accounting for historical praxes within Europe and China.

I have argued that the levels at which IR and HS discussions of developmental divergence have taken place impede the understanding of the reasons pre-modern paths led to such diversity. From the comparative stance of the initial debate on the transition to capitalism and the subsequent 'Great Divergence' controversy in political development, to the Realist and English School's theorisations of international systems and Frank's global economy perspective, what was missing was a way to make sense of social agency in the interactions between these 'levels', or, to better phrase it, amongst the social institutions of authority relations, geopolitics, and market dynamics. It is here that the issue of Eurocentrism and the need for a social theory of IR meet. Analytical anachronisms continue to prevent these approaches, all of which question the 'Rise of the West' narratives, from sociologically re-problematising the divergence in a non-Eurocentric fashion. Chapter One described what I argue to be the four overlooked facets of Eurocentrism, culminating in the reification of spatial entities, geopolitical dynamics, rationality, and spheres of social activities, as a Eurocentric legacy of the 'Rise of the West' narratives. The empirical part of the thesis, contesting the major 'Great Divergence' analyses<sup>240</sup>, has proven that they all face the same

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<sup>240</sup> The term 'Great Divergence' analyses is used here to refer more broadly to all authors, studied in the thesis, who re-theorised the divergence of Chinese and European developmental trajectories. This category therefore goes beyond the California School, and encompasses also Zhang and Buzan's English School analyses, Kang's Realist model, and Frank's WST.

pitfalls as the traditional studies they aim to dislodge.

The first unaddressed problem in all these analyses is the self-evident character of the units of analysis studied. A critical interrogation of what was ‘China’ or ‘Europe’ at a given time, and why it became so, is more than a question of historical specification. The mobilisation of these categories as unproblematic stems from assumptions about the working of the ‘international’. This second Eurocentric pitfall of naturalising the European international system leads to presupposing its long-term consequences, from which eventual isomorphising state forms and agent behaviours are inferred. In this way, comparisons between Europe and China turn ultimately into mere exemplifications of the impact of diverging spatial ordering principles, which are themselves already held as theoretically secure. This is the case not only for Frank’s functionalist theory of the world-economy, but also for Kang and Buzan’s comparisons between hierarchical and anarchical international societies and Wong and Rosenthal’s finding of an original divergence in ‘spatial economies’.

Such disinterest in the historical reconstruction of authority relations and geopolitical orders and in a social understanding of geopolitical dynamics in turn weakens the anti-Eurocentric argument of a late and ‘accidental’ ‘Great Divergence’, as formulated most notably by Pomeranz. For it turns out, in such analyses, that everything was already set for the universal, profit-maximising rationality of agents to develop across Europe, whether or not such phenomena are claimed to have been already present in an ‘incipient’ form in China. These narratives take the form of analyses of, on the one hand, the ‘state’ and the ‘international’ and, on the other hand, the ‘economy’, which are initially dissociated from one another. These dimensions are later reconciled by asking how the first two (‘state’ and ‘international’) impacted on the liberation of the immanent forces of the third. This overlooks the social anchoring of rationality, which I have argued to be the third facet of Eurocentrism, and derives universal theoretical concepts from the ontologising of categories based on a specific narrative of the European experience(s). The questionable spatial categories of Europe and China, as well as the notions of Confucian state, Chinese World Order, and pacified internal market and world-economy, all rely on the problematic

assumption of the universality of the inside/outside and economic/political differentiations in world history. This fourth Eurocentric pitfall is what makes it impossible for these ‘Great Divergence’ scholars to ask the crucial question: ‘how has it become phenomenologically possible for social agents to conceive the relation between power and space in these terms?’ (Lapointe and Dufour, 2011: 5)

These Eurocentric conceptual anachronisms, which the ‘Great Divergence’ debate has imported unchallenged from the ‘Rise of the West’ narratives, have important implications for the understanding of the transition to modernity. I claimed that the ‘Great Divergence’ scholars’ inability to historicise, politicise, and sociologise the institutions of the state, market, and geopolitics leave them ultimately unable to sociologically explain the fundamental rupture towards modern political geography (the distinction between the domestic and the international) and modern development (the formal separation of means of domination and exploitation). The ontologising of these distinctive ways to organise spatial and social relations renders invisible the fundamental similarity between continental Europe and Imperial China: the politicisation of the economy and the governing of geopolitics by dynamics of appropriation. Despite belonging in this way to a pre-modern continuum, authority relations and geopolitical orders within Europe and East Asia were eminently singular. Transitions and non-transitions to modernity are best captured, I argued, by reconstructing political subjectivities and social agency at the origins of diverging historical trajectories, in a move towards challenging the IR understanding of its political and spatial categories as fundamentally, and Eurocentrically, settled.

In the following pages, I will highlight the thesis’ contributions to both the field of HS and IR. I will first summarise my empirical findings, and stress their importance for an agential understanding of Chinese long-term development beyond traditional Sinology. I will then turn to my double contributions to IR theory, regarding Eurocentrism and a social theorisation of geopolitics. Lastly, I will outline what such findings lead to in terms of understanding 19<sup>th</sup> Century China, in the period following the ‘Great Divergence’.

## **1. A new Historical Sociology of China**

This thesis started from the recognition that the HS of China is surprisingly weak in terms of this methodological tradition's commitment 'to unravel the complexity that lies behind the interaction between social action and social structures' (Hobson, Lawson, and Rosenberg, 2010: 3361). I demonstrated that the origin of this weakness lies in the HS reliance on Sinology's state-gentry paradigm, itself only partly dissociated from the 'dynastic cycles' paradigm characteristic of Chinese imperial ideology. HS has therefore not fully succeeded in overcoming the prevalent perception of China as a universal empire stretching over nearly two millennia, which was rendered eminently stable by Confucian order and pacified relations with 'internal' and 'external' actors.

In contrast, my critical engagement with historiographical debates has challenged these assumptions of stability, hegemony, and immutability. Chapters Five and Seven have shown that authority relations in China and interactions with other polities adopted tremendously different forms over time. This has been argued to be the case because pre-modern social conflicts took the form of competition for political power and privileges and struggles around the extra-economic institutionalisation of inequalities, reverberating on the very forms, and contested nature, of the Chinese 'state' and political geography. Such an analysis has proven able to explain what was circumvented to by IR's reliance on Sinology's traditional paradigms: dynastic transitions, prevalence of wars, marginalisation of the examination route in access to office, changing attitudes towards inter-regional and international exchanges, and variations in the degree of territorial integration and political centralisation. The key element guiding my counter-narrative has been to propose a phenomenology of power of the Mandate of Heaven and benevolence, presented in Chapters Four and Six, which demystified, respectively, the analytically assumed inside/outside and economic/political differentiations. In this section, I want to re-emphasise how this grounding of political and geopolitical patterns, processes, and institutions within changing social-property relations is necessary in order to avoid the 'Great Divergence' scholars' shortcomings in drawing out the implications of the new historical literature on China.

The California School was certainly innovative in portraying Late Imperial China as a

vibrant example of economic dynamism, and as a power both at the apex of its regional system and on par with Europe. According to these scholars, this was enabled by China's contrasting (geo)political organisation. This assessment was grounded in recent Sinology works which engaged with persisting myths regarding China's demographic and economic patterns. It has long been taken for granted that Imperial China diverged from Europe due to the absence of fertility controls and autonomous merchants. Sinology has been revolutionised by recent studies counter-arguing that an array of strategies were used to control the number of children born, leading to fertility rates at least comparable to Europe, (Lee and Campbell, 1997; Lee and Wang, 1995) and that important waves of commercialisation occurred under the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasty (Li, 1998; Shiba, 1970), whilst coexisting with a lively inter-Asian trade system (Hamashita, 1994). The California School builds on these works to propose that such controlled demographic growth and unimpeded exchanges led to Smithian development, as it did in Europe, because of a similar incapacity/unwillingness of the elite and the state to interfere with commercial exchanges.

As it is derivative of the state-gentry paradigm, the California School relied in this way on a series of propositions, the explanatory power of which ultimately resides in varying state strength. I have rather started by asking how a series of forms taken for granted in traditional Sinology, such as 'state', 'society', and 'economy', were phenomenologically understood by agents. I have therefore asked how these newly revealed demographic and commercial patterns could have originated from, and impacted on, agents' behaviours, whilst taking account of the fact that their rationality should be socially contextualised in this manner. This led me to contend empirically and theoretically with a series of postulates, all of which are deemed to have a causal role in China's 'Smithian development': political non-interference in the economy, secure state/society relations, and 'China's' (geo)political stability.

Firstly, I have showed that Chinese commercialisation (in the California School's language, development) is not to be explained by the distance between the 'state' (or the 'political') and 'commerce' (or the 'economy'), but rather through the very politicisation of the

economy itself, or in other words the imbrication of relations of domination and relations of exploitation. Commercialisation was not a linear and natural outcome of demographic and market expansions. Its social origin lies in proto-industrialisation, enabled by the traditional pre-modern strategy of the intensification of peasant family labour through commercial ventures (less rewarding than their working of their land), as occurred when peasants were confronted with the inability to ensure their subsistence from their unit of land, following from the subdivision of plots. I have therefore rejected the conceptions of Chinese commercialisation as referring to zones of free labour and land markets (Pomeranz, 2000), as powered by international demand (Frank, 1998), and as structurally derivative from the large 'spatial scale' of China's pacified exchanges (Rosenthal and Wong, 2011). I have also contested the relation these scholars establish between commercialisation and the alleged absence of international competition, thereby enabling China to invest in welfare and economic infrastructures. Commercialisation has rather been shown to have been amenable to different types of social-property, authority, and geopolitical relations. For example, Song commercialisation occurred within a (relatively) small territory, in the context of tremendous military expenditures and geopolitical uncertainty. Under the Ming, commercialisation relied on a form of state/gentry 'collaboration' in maintaining status differentiation between servile or slave peasants and landlords, whilst external trade was governed by the tribute-system. The Qing period displayed yet another pattern of commercialisation, through its smallholders' economy in which peasants' freedom and rights to land were backed by the rulers, in a context of 'free' external trade. The Qing's unprecedented territorial expansion moreover provided the conditions of possibility for Chinese inter-regional trade. Given these differences, waves of commercialisation are therefore better explained through the changing ways the economy was politicised, depending on the manner peasants, landlords, merchants, and rulers were able to 'internally' and 'externally' assert their power.

Enquiring into such agentially-led changing patterns of social-property, authority, and geopolitical relations entails, moreover, a revision of Weberian Sinology's key postulate of stability and continuity in state/society and state/gentry relations. According to this widespread understanding of Imperial China, the Chinese state taxed producers in order to

ensure the preservation of the (domestic) social order and (geopolitical) state survival. In these narratives (e.g. Fairbank and Goldman, 2006; Levenson, 1968), the degree of state/gentry collaboration impacted on the imperial state's penetration of society and the reach of its infrastructural power; this explains why dynasties waxed and waned. Each dynastic cycle started with the state having a strong grip on the gentry, whose power gradually increased until the ruling house's share of revenues declined to the point that it was left unable to resist rival would-be dynasts (Hall, 1986: 42-43; Bol, 2003: 4).

In order to summarise my own reconstruction of the Chinese trajectory, I will explain how the insights generated by my alternative framework led me to challenge: the dynastic cycles paradigm's relegation of the conflictual moments to inter-dynastic periods; its under-theorisation of dynastic transitions; and the historical 'deviations' from the paradigm's expectations. My re-conceptualisation of successive Chinese polities within their geopolitical contexts does not, however, only add richness and complexity to an understanding of the Chinese trajectory. Overall, I have argued that the key to understanding why state/society and state/gentry relations were not characterised by stability and continuity, as the California School would have it, is to reintroduce into the analysis the role of the producers. The problematisation of the 'economic' rights to exploitation implied in the 'political' struggle for domination or prestige allowed me to take into account the object of contention between the state and the gentry, i.e. access to peasants' surpluses. Such an understanding of authority relations as embedded in relations of exploitation led me to demystify the notion of a perennial Chinese 'state' and 'society' only represented under different dynastic denominations. The ultimate explanation of these variations resides in contentions around power, which took the form of control over land and people.

Firstly, this allows for re-capturing the dynamics behind my findings – running contrary to the common understanding of China's history - of eminently temporally divergent mobilisations of the office-system and tribute-system, the alleged permanence of which is commonly understood to have been a key component of China's expanding market. This can uniquely explain a series of generally unacknowledged facts about China's history.



Rather than abiding by meritocratic and efficiency principles, official positions primarily gave access to the means of appropriation and could also be granted as reward and bought. China's (relative) political centralisation, as an unstable socio-political arrangement, therefore rested on an economy of privatisation of shares of public power. There was no uniform governing of 'Chinese' territories, which moreover were constantly being re-mapped, because the ruling house had to adapt its ambitions to fit the regionally varying balance of class forces, itself maintained through a routine economy of violence. Rather than being periods of pacified relations, each dynastic cycle was, during most of the time, constituted of the dynamic of conquests of what is generally considered as 'internal' actors, and there was generally more than one contender for the Mandate of Heaven. Crucially, these features were not exclusive to times of dynastic change, as the dynastic cycles paradigm would have it; they were constitutive elements of the ongoing struggles around power.

Yet this paradigm lacks a theory of social change, as it explains away processes of re-conquest of mandates and periods of 'disunification'. Why would the state naturally lose control over time? What explains the variations in lengths of unification periods? Answers cannot be provided by the state/gentry paradigm's sociology of domination: its explanation of dynastic change devolves into a mere description of the relative distribution of power between the state and the elite. This happens because the source of their contention is not analytically examined. To be sure, dynastic changes occurred in geopolitically challenging times and against a background of intra-elite conflict, but there is still the need to theoretically make sense of the way these events translated into dynastic change. To this end, I have argued that war-induced fiscal crises, arising from the relatively bellicose East Asian context, tested the balance of power within and between classes. Threats to the ruling house's capacity of carrying out the 'political tasks' of social order and state survival were indeed simultaneously threats to the social arrangement of the distribution of revenues and the organisation and level of surplus extraction. The outcomes of such conflicts should be understood as agentially-led, and sociologically reconstructed.

My alternative theoretical framework can also uniquely explain several 'anomalies' within

the dynastic cycles paradigm's picture of declining state strength within each cycle, the endings of which are the exclusive instances of where geopolitical challenges are included. For example, the Song inherited from the start an economy of large gentry-owned estates and survived under constant and extreme geopolitical pressures, whilst the Ming reign ended in a context of radically devastated gentry power. These anomalies are doubly puzzling as they refer to 'native' regimes taken as ideal-types of China's 'true nature'. Deciphering such 'anomalies' requires recognising that the organisation of peasants' and elites' into communities varied significantly in terms of the capacity for resistance beyond the periods of dynastic change, and that these political organisations mattered because peasant resistance impacted upon levels of surplus extraction and how effective the collection of rent and taxes was, whilst landlords, officials, merchants, and lineages contended amongst themselves and with the imperial center for shares in the revenue redistribution originating from this surplus extraction. In short, revising the stable ontologies of traditional Sinology by theorising contestations around the political constitution of property is necessary in order to understand China's 'non-rise' without it seeing it as 'vegetating in the teeth of time' (Marx, 1858).

## **2. A new anti-Eurocentric theory of geopolitical relations**

Beyond its innovative empirical findings, this thesis' had two key objectives regarding its theoretical contribution to the discipline of IR: to propose a non-Eurocentric way to theorise similarity and dissimilarity in developmental trajectories, and to offer a social and phenomenological method by which to understand historical variations in spatial orderings.

In the theoretical section of the thesis, I have demonstrated that my PM-informed method can overcome three of the four main accusations of Eurocentrism levelled against IR in general and Marxism in particular: the superiority of Europe's inherent proprieties (Orientalism); a stagist theory of history (historicism); and an inability to theorise the non-Western world (Eurocentred categorisation of the world)<sup>241</sup>. In Chapter One, the PM

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<sup>241</sup> Properly challenging the exteriorisation of the non-Western world from the constitution of modernity (methodological nationalism) has been deemed an empirical (rather than normative) endeavour beyond the scope of the thesis.

suspicion against taking Europe as a coherent unit was argued to set this approach apart from both the ‘Rise of the West’ narratives’ and their main detractor’s non-problematization of the international, itself at the origins of the persisting ‘state-system vs. empire’ dichotomous perspective on the Western and non-Western worlds. Chapter Two went on to distinguish between Marxist theories of history and methodologies in order to unravel which readings of Marx led to a mechanical and teleological understanding of social development and to the congealing of historical praxes into sterile classifications. How this particular understanding of the HM project has led to PM’s emphasis on specificity, class struggles, and agentially-driven historicisation was then further elaborated in Chapter Three. It is there that I elaborated on the controversy over PM’s alleged internalism, which, if it cannot be fully refuted, can nonetheless be defended as a causal explanation of the emergence of modernity which does not neglect to weigh geopolitical or external factors against internal ones.

However, my PM method has been announced not only as non-Eurocentric, but foremost as making a critical contribution to the problem of understanding world history through the prism of European modernity. This contribution, based on the countering of the four overlooked anti-Eurocentric pitfalls mentioned above, has taken the form of providing for an IR theory amenable to track immanently socio-political conflicts and social change in non-Western contexts, which has simultaneously led to a re-thinking of Europe-China comparative strategies.

The PM project of radical historicisation through an agential reconstruction of social change has been applied to the comparative analysis of political development in China and Europe. This has further contributed to the underlining of structural accounts of the transition to the modern state-system, accounts that neo-Weberian HS and the English School have preserved from the neo-Realist domination of the field. In the discipline of IR, there is a widespread acceptance of the causal and historical links between war and state-formation in Europe. Whereas European international competition is supposed to lead states to maximise their fiscal-military capacities, the absence of such pressures in East Asia is theorised by anti-Eurocentric scholars as pacifying its internal and external orders, thus

providing an alternate route to economic expansion. The thesis has aimed to critically evaluate this IR argument that spatial ordering principles, in the form of state-system/anarchy or universal empire/hierarchy, govern state behaviour. This is what led the ‘Great Divergence’ scholars to give the ‘international’ (or absence thereof) a causal role in the long-term developmental dissimilarity of China and Europe.

By complementing the PM analysis of geopolitically mediated processes of state-formation in Europe with the study of comparable processes in China, I have further proven that we cannot derive expected outcomes from geopolitical environments. Both have to be historicised in order to make sense of the crucial empirical findings that the structural stimuli of a war-prone environment neither entailed identical and rational responses from European polities, nor was exclusive to Europe. In fact, finding the social origins of specifically pre-modern geopolitical competition within strategies of geopolitical accumulation can uniquely explain how this led to variegated responses in the differing forms of the privatisation (rather than rationalisation) of public power. Such anchoring of the sources of, and responses to, military pressures within the dynastic extra-economic constitution of the extraction and redistribution of revenue explains how the concrete results of war pressures contradicted the expected outcome of the rise of de-personalised modern states.

In this regard, continental Europe was not different from Imperial China. Understanding this similarity carries in its wake the necessity to reintroduce the analysis of capitalism, and its distinctiveness, within a social theory of geopolitical relations. This is the case as submitting geopolitical and political orders to sociological enquiry implies contextualising the motivations of agents in terms of social reproduction, and therefore asking how power was differently deployed in pre-modern settings. As long as authority relations mediated dynamics of appropriation, strategies of social reproduction took the form of contentions over control of land and people via political privileges and the remodelling of frontiers.

Teschke (2003) has already signalled that the ontology of IR is in strong need of revision because of this. This comparison with China has taken the argument one step further.

Against the new anti-Eurocentric literature in IR, it has proved fundamentally that IR's timeless notions of 'state' and 'international' should be abandoned for the pre-modern era, and not merely for the non-Western world presumed to abide by different principles. The 'Great Divergence' scholars have attempted to disprove the universality of IR theories, regarding the causal relation between anarchy and development, by testing these theories in relation to non-Western cases. Understanding geopolitical diversity was argued to necessitate the addition of clauses to the main IR axioms, i.e. that East Asia's alternatives to Westphalian principles (whether conceptualised as international society or international competition), in the form of hierarchy or the absence of a war-like environment, can also foster stability or development. I have demonstrated that this reiterates the Eurocentric legacy of the 'Rise of the West', and merely extends the reification of the 'international' from Europe to East Asia, whilst preserving this dichotomised understanding of the world. For the historicisation of the series of dichotomies on which the discipline of IR is based (state/society, economic/political, domestic/international) demonstrates that the modern dividing line is not a geographical one, but a social one.

### **3. Implications for understanding China's decline**

The California School takes the years 1750 or 1800 as the turning point where Europe caught up with, and outdistanced, China. The thesis has however demonstrated that continental Europe and Imperial China were on a pre-modern continuum until this period of the 'Great Divergence'. Does the turning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century mark the point from which we could finally speak of a 'Great Divergence' between China and Europe as a whole? I will rather contend that the 19<sup>th</sup> Century continental Europe state-transformations are best seen as modernising rather than modern (Teschke, 2006: 56), whilst outlining the implications of my alternative theoretical framework for understanding China 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

The period following the Qianlong reign (1735-1796) is generally seen as the beginning of Imperial China's decline. Rulers and officials started to worry about demographic pressures, domestic and external threats, and inflation. The Treaty of Nanjing following Britain's victory in the First Opium war (1839-1842) imposed massive reparations, the ceding of Hong Kong, extraterritoriality for British citizens, and the opening up of five

cities to free trade with fixed tariffs. France and America soon secured the same privileges. The Taiping rebellions (1850-1864), cutting much of the Yangzi valley from imperial control, dealt a further weakening blow to the dynasty. This partly coincided also with the Arrow War, or Second Opium War (1856-60). Further setbacks contributed to the later fall of the dynasty in 1911, in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Boxer rebellion (1898-1900), and the ‘scramble for concessions’ by Western, Japanese, and Russian powers (1898-1920). The Qing also lost its former tributary states of Liuqu (1870), Vietnam (1874/1893), Laos (1893), Burma (1886), and Taiwan and Korea (1895) in the process.

From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Qing started a wave of reforms aiming to overcome domestic distress and external threats. A part of these reforms are known under the name of *yangwu* (‘foreign matters’), i.e. the adaptation of Western innovations, especially its technology and diplomatic methods. It adopted the specific form of *zhong xue wei ti, xi xue wei yong* (or *ti-yong* - Chinese learning for the essentials and Western learning for practical application). The ‘self-strengthening’ program (*zhiqiang*) had broad implications, seeking to modernise both its defence industry, by adapting Western innovations (such as the Jiangnan Arsenal and the Fuzhou Naval Dockyard), and its finance. Such examples include the *guandu shangban* system (translated as official supervision and merchant management), from which emerged the China’s Merchant Steam Navigation Company, and the reorganisation of taxes on trade (the *lijin* and the customs duties). Notable institutional innovations of the period also included the establishment in 1861 of a foreign office, the *Zongli Yamen*, to deal with Western powers and manage the Customs Administration.

Even if this period is only glossed over by the ‘Great Divergence’ scholars, their understanding of 19<sup>th</sup> Century China illustrates the conundrums the commercial, geopolitical, and ideational model led to. These authors see this period foremost through the prism of increasing economic, geopolitical, and normative contact between China and the West. Given that these models predict that increasing commercial activities, geopolitical challenges, and socialisation with Western norms usher in modernity (whether defined in economic, military, or political terms), their proponents have great difficulty in explaining

the ‘incompletion’ of Chinese development in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Traditional explanations point to the entrenched Confucian traditional order, with its institutions and ideology inimical to changes (Feuerwerker, 1958; Ma, Brandt, and Rawski, 2004; Fairbank, 1953; Wright, 1957), and the limitations of Western economic penetration beyond the coastal cities (Platt, 1968; Dernberger, 1975; Murphey, 1977), as the causal factors explaining why the presupposed outcomes of *yangwu* and incorporation in the Western sphere of influence did not occur.

As the California School preserves the commercial model but associates such explanations with Eurocentrism, this ‘dead-end’ is explained through external factors, such as the new ordering of international economy and imperialism countering the Chinese indigenous development (Frank, 1998; Hobson, 2004; Wong, 1997), or by historical or geographical contingencies (Pomeranz, 2000). Authors associated with the English School rather theorise 19th Century China’s need to adapt to the European society’s norms (Suzuki, 2009; Zhang 2001). According to them, the demise of the Sinocentric order led to disputes between reformists and Confucians, opposed to accepting the sovereignty and equality principles. Neo-Weberian scholars, such as Skocpol (1979) and Horowitz (1998), rather understand this period as one of unprecedented geopolitical challenges. They emphasise the gentry’s role in the incomplete imperial attempts at military modernisation and centralisation. All these authors however implicitly convey that Imperial China could (should) have adopted the Western path of development<sup>242</sup>, were it not for some obstacles it was confronted with. This is the case as their analysis is based on the singularity of China in comparison to Europe taken as a homogenous entity, or else the measures of success are derived from an idealised perspective on European development.

I would rather suggest that China’s imperial decline had socio-economic origins, in the diminishing land/labour ratio and concomitant decline in labour productivity. This trend had been innovatively postponed by combining expansion with the promotion of

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<sup>242</sup> This is less present in Skocpol work’s, who is incidentally not concerned with 19th Century decline *per se*, as she does not presuppose a unique path of development. Still, her theorisation of the ‘autonomous state’s interests’ is derived from the universalisation of the economic/political and inside/outside differentiations.

colonisation and inter-regional grain trade during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The domestic and geopolitical challenges of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century (the Taiping rebellions and the Opium wars) however threatened the social reproduction of the elites, notably by depriving them of their control over peasants' surpluses in the Jiangnan and the revenues from the Canton system. Such 'internal' and 'external' challenges triggered war-induced fiscal crises which in turn prompted social conflicts as this threatened the social arrangement governing the access to sources of income. From the imposition of new commercial taxes, reestablishment of rent relations in the war-devastated Delta, negotiations around office venality, to the institution of new forms of enterprises, important reforms were thus undertaken. This was done in order to improve the extraction of social surplus (from the peasants) and the redistribution of revenues (amongst the elites) as much as to restore the throne's finances, in its 'private' and 'public' aspects which were however not dissociated. The form and implementation of the reforms depended on how well different elite groups were organised and how producers resisted, through their political communities (whether in the form of villages, lineages, guilds, gentry bureaus, etc.). The aims of the modernisation, as part of the project of overcoming imperial decline, went parallel to the working political economy of state power. It did not overthrow and re-make it along properly 'modern' lines – or even intend to. This is not because 'traditional' Imperial China itself was not a fertile ground for modernity, but because no pre-modern society was. The crucial mistake made by scholars like Wright or Feuerwerker is not their identification of a 'backward' China *per se*, it is rather that they oppose it to Western industrialisation and enlightenment in general.

I rather suggest that we should enquire into similarities with other revolutions from above in Europe in the broader context of state-led industrialisation. The dividing line is less between the West and the East than amongst historically distinct state-transformation projects led by pre-capitalist classes in times of imperial decline, on the European continent and in Imperial China alike. Industrialisation and 'modernisation' are however not necessarily coeval with qualitative changes, nor do they naturally and inevitably grow from all 'commercial' or geopolitically-challenged societies. The task of HS is to show how such processes arose from contending projects in specific socio-economic contexts.



I would argue that we must start such enquiry by theorising the unique case of Britain, in which industrial development took place as a maturation of agrarian capitalism (Brenner and Isett, 2002; Wood, 2002; Zmolek, 2013). Further investigating the elites' contentions around power reveals how their social power still derived from the state, in Imperial China as in continental Europe during the long 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The case of China might thus be more comparable than is generally acknowledged to the long 19<sup>th</sup> Century understood as a period of 'modernising, not modern' state transformations made across Europe in response to British pre-eminence (Lacher, 2006; Lacher and Germann, 2012; Teschke, 2005). The case of China sheds light on the similarities shared by such states which, upon geopolitical pressures depriving the 'state-class' of their personal and politically-constituted sources of revenues, attempted reforms replicating pre-existing patterns. The long-term consequences of these certainly differed between Japan, the Ottoman Empire, Russia, France, Germany, and China. All are parts however of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century history of dynastic re-organisations of the distribution of power along pre-modern lines, upon the impetus of geopolitically mediated social crises whose outcomes could not be predicted but only made sense of retrospectively. Such an understanding reiterates the need for an agentially-led theory of state transformations which revisits the classical IR periodisation which dichotomises 'Western' and non-Western trajectories.

Overall, this thesis has shown that Eurocentrism should not be considered as an issue peripheral to the discipline of IR. It has profound consequences for the way we theorise social changes, geopolitics, and agents' behaviours. The 'Great Divergence' and the emergence of the modernity of IR can only be understood by transcending Eurocentric analytical anachronisms in terms of political geography and development. The project of socialising and historicising IR generic concepts still has consequences for our understanding of the later contestations of the implementations of these inside/outside and economic/political differentiations. Strategies of concrete historicisation of IR categories as praxes are crucial to overcome Eurocentrism.

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